In the Valley of the Weed

Suspended from his job when his politically incorrect email correspondence is leaked on the internet, Tim Vicars disappears. Is he hiding in shame? Is he running away from the erotic complexities of wife, mistress and literary agent? Or has his research project on decriminalizing marijuana provoked the growers and dealers to direct action? Plant, hired to find him, heads off into the valley of the weed.

Also by Michael Wilding

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Studies in Classic Australian Fiction

In the Valley of the Weed

by Michael Wilding

ARCADIA

To Barry

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First published 2016 by Arcadia
the general books' imprint of
Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd
7 Lt Lothian St Nth, North Melbourne, Victoria 3051

tel 03 9329 6963 / *fax* 03 9329 5452
aspic@ozemail.com / www.scholarly.info

ISBN: 978-1-925333-97–8

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Cover design Amelia Walker

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Acknowledgement is made to the *Review of Australian Fiction* and *Meanjin* in which excerpts from this novel first appeared.

In the Valley of the Weed

Chapter One

Plant gazed out of the window at nature. If it wasn't for nature, he reflected, he wouldn't do anything. If it wasn't for the natural process of decay, he would never get round to any action. But now that all the fruit and vegetables on sale in the shops seemed to decay three days after it was bought, he had to keep going out to replace them. Stockpiling was no longer an option. Cultivate his garden or go out and shop. It was a great force for activity, decay. He reflected some more on the paradox and symmetry of it.

The phone rang and he answered it. Something else to do.

'What are you up to?' Fullalove asked.

'Not a lot.'

'That's a worry.'

'No it isn't.'

'Really?'

'Suits me.'

'You're vegetating, Plant,' Fullalove said. 'Next you'll be composting. Transmuted into leaf mould. The end is nigh.'

Plant conceded that that was quite probable.

'What are you going to do about it?'

'Not a lot,' Plant said again.

'I've got something for you.'

'Uh-huh,' Plant responded. The days of unguarded enthusiasm had passed, along with so much else.

'Not interested?'

'Depends what it is, I guess.'

'I bumped into Uncle Toby.'

'Is that so?' Plant said, knowing full well that it wasn't. And knowing that Fullalove knew that he knew that, too. Uncle Toby, emeritus professor Oates, was not someone you bumped into. Either you phoned for a meeting, or Uncle Toby so arranged it that your paths crossed his by some pseudo-synchronicity.

'He's got something for you.'

'Is that so?' Plant said. Again. Repeating himself yet once more. 'I thought you said you'd got something for me.'

'Just passing it along,' Fullalove said.

'So what's he got?'

'He didn't say. He wants you to drop by.'

'Why didn't he ask me himself?'

'Presumably because he didn't want to leave any phone or email trace.'

'And now he wants me to drop by rather than phone or email him back.'

'Got it in one.'

'Any particular time or date I should drop by?'

'Midday.'

'Midday when?'

'Friday.'

'It's already Thursday afternoon.'

'Well, no problem, then,' Fullalove said. 'Tomorrow, at Burleigh Heads.'

'Not at his place.'

'No. At some restaurant. I've written it down somewhere.'

Plant waited for Fullalove to rummage around for the name.

'Where did you bump into him?' Plant asked.

'Around the traps.'

'Of course,' Plant said.

Where else?

And then the phone cut out and there was nothing but an electronic buzzing, Fullalove in customary anti-surveillance mode having called not from his own landline but from a rare, unvandalised phone box and presumably run out of money, coins not credit card.

Uncle Toby had bagged a table by the window. The restaurant was built at the very edge of the ocean, the waves surging up and splashing against the glass when the weather was rough. Uncle Toby no doubt chose it to enhance a sense of drama. And as a way to keep Plant from being seen entering his apartment. Or maybe he liked the food.

'Dear boy,' Uncle Toby said, 'how nice of you to drop by.'

Plant gave his nice smile.

'I was only thinking of you today. Or was it yesterday?'

'I don't know,' Plant said.

'Really? Of course you don't. Telepathy not one of your tricks.'

It was not clear whether that was a statement or a question. Plant left it unanswered, anyway.

'How about a drink?' Uncle Toby asked.

Plant shook his head. These were the days of declining things. Some of them.

'Have a seat then,' Uncle Toby offered.

Plant sat and took in the view from the window. Ocean. Lots of it.

'So?' Plant said.

'What a glorious day,' Uncle Toby said. The sun drenched ocean, the surf breaking , the golden sand.

Uncle Toby was kitted out in Gold Coast white shoe mode. White

shoes, white slacks, short sleeved shirt of some garish and colourful design, gold necklace, and hair of an unnatural black, seemingly unwithered by age.

'Fullalove phoned me.'

'Ah, how is he, dear boy?'

'Much as he was when you last saw him, I imagine.'

'Now when would that have been?' Uncle Toby asked, as if reflectively.

'A couple of days ago, I'm told.'

Uncle Toby smiled. 'How right you are.' He didn't say where.

'He said you had something for me.'

'No beating about the bush.'

'Or you wanted something from me.'

'Oh dear, that sounds a trifle peremptory.'

'Doesn't it,' Plant agreed.

'Well, I might have something for you. Only should you want it, of course. There's no compulsion.'

'Of course.' It seemed worth making that clear. Or trying to. No compulsion. Anyway, how could there be? Though the very assertion of its absence implied that potentially compulsion could be brought into play. In the world of Uncle Toby. If that indeed was the world that Uncle Toby inhabited.

'A sad business,' Uncle Toby said.

'A dear friend of mine,' Uncle Toby offered, in between mouthfuls of barramundi, 'from long ago, an acquaintance really, one shouldn't presume too much, but I knew him in his youth. Tim Vicars. You might have heard of him. A modest media profile.'

'Can't say I have,' Plant said, who had pretty well given up on the

media. Lies and scare stories, who needed it?

He waited. A clue. A name. Uncle Toby was a master of narrative suspense and minimal disclosure.

'Faded a bit now, perhaps. These things happen. Over the years.'

Plant nodded. Time's revenges, he might have muttered. Nature's decay.

'I remember him when he was just starting out.'

'One of yours?'

'Not precisely.'

Nothing ever being that precisely defined with Uncle Toby.

'I taught a couple of courses he enrolled in. But he ranged widely. Interdisciplinary sort of chap. What the chefs call fusion, I believe. I helped him on his way.'

'Which was where?'

'Oh, overseas. Britain. The States. Quite a stellar career.'

'And . . . ?'

'And then he comes back here on a visiting fellowship and the next thing I hear is that he's disappeared.'

'Uh-huh,' Plant said.

'Indeed.'

'Suspicious circumstances?'

'Well that's what we don't know.'

'We?'

'Old friends.'

'He had friends?'

'Of course. Friends. Acquaintances.'

'Even though he'd been overseas for years. A high flyer.'

Uncle Toby smiled wanly.

'Yes, despite success.'

'Though the success was fading.'

'Well, I don't know about that.'

'You said . . .'

'I know, I know. What I meant was that he might not have been a name on the tip of everyone's tongue for a while . . .'

'Faded,' Plant persisted.

'But he was set for a comeback.'

'Really?'

'Oh yes. Undoubtedly.'

'If he hadn't disappeared.'

Uncle Toby gave a grunt expressive of disapproval or dissociation.

'A comeback in what way?'

'He was attracting media attention.'

'For anything in particular?'

'He was a player in two major debates.'

'Debates?' Plant said. He couldn't help himself. 'When was anything ever debated in the media? You've got to have more than one position to have a debate.'

'Yes, well, the standard of public discourse is deplorably low,' Uncle Toby conceded, 'but that's beside the point.'

Plant rather doubted that. If someone was getting media space, it had to be in someone's interest. There was a point there somewhere.

'He'd written pieces on the freedom of the internet debate and the decriminalising of marijuana debate that were attracting notice.'

'How?'

'What do you mean, "How?"?'

'How were they attracting attention?'

'In the press. Opinion pieces. Talk shows.'

'Talk shows?'

'You'd be surprised how many there are when you come to look into it. Radio and television. Current affairs. Religion. Rural industries. Morning shows. Late night talk back.'

'And he was holding forth on all of them?'

'Over time, yes, on a fair number of them.'

'How did he manage that?'

'I don't know that he did "manage that" as you put it. I imagine they called him up.'

'Well connected, then. Or a very determined hustler.'

Uncle Toby presented a bland face.

'I cannot say,' he said. 'I don't know about you, but I have never been consumed with a desire to appear on television and have my face a household item.'

'But your missing friend was.'

'You know, I'd never thought about that before, but you might have put your finger on something. Perhaps there was a degree of, how shall I put it . . . ?'

Plant waited.

Narcissism, megalomania, exhibitionism . . .

But Uncle Toby merely gestured out to sea.

'His partner, a dear girl, is most upset, as you might imagine.'

'I imagine she might be.'

'She finds it hard to accept.'

'Fair enough.'

'Not really,' Uncle Toby said. 'She's suffering, of course. But she keeps refusing to accept the . . .'

'The what?'

'Well, the facts.'

'Which are?'

'That he has gone missing.'

'You think he might be dead?'

Uncle Toby spread his arms in a gesture of beneficence.

'It's not just a missing person case?'

'Oh, I'm sure it is.'

'What do the police say?'

'Oh, we don't think it's a police matter. He's probably just wandered off. You know how these things can happen. A lovers' tiff. Marital misunderstanding.'

'You're not suspecting foul play or anything.'

'Not necessarily.'

Plant wondered at the force of the necessarily.

'And she says he wouldn't have killed himself.'

'Precisely.'

'But you don't think so.'

'Oh, no. No, I'm sure she's right.'

'How about murder?'

'I don't think so,' Uncle Toby said, never one for the extreme option. Not for publicly expressing it, anyway.

'But she does.'

'Well, not in so many words. It's most unlikely. But she is a little distressed.'

'So . . .'

'Yes . . .'

'You want me to . . .'

'Would you? Go and see her. See if you can set her mind at rest.'

'I can't see how I can do that,' Plant said. 'I'll go and see her, if that's what she wants. But I don't see how I'm going to set her mind at rest. She's got a choice. Suicide, murder, accident, amnesia, or he's just run away. Unless he's been kidnapped. Or died from natural causes. I mean, which option should I recommend for peace of mind?'

'Just go and see her. There's probably nothing you can do. But she feels she needs to find out what happened, and she's one of those people a bit like you who has no faith in the police. Maybe you can make some inquiries for her. Discreetly, of course.'

'You've mentioned me to her? I can't just drop in out of the blue.'

'Of course. I highly recommended you.'

'So she wants to hire me?'

'Oh yes. I suggested that she should. To set her mind at rest. You'll get paid. No need to worry on that score, dear boy.'

How to insult the hired help and put them in their place. Plant was used to it. It went with the job. And it went with making sure you got paid. Or at least the promise of payment. It still wrenched his stomach. But what were a few stomach pangs? Not getting paid was worse.

'What about his colleagues at university?'

'What about them?'

'Have any of them noticed he's missing?'

'A visiting professor? I doubt anyone has taken much notice. If they even knew he was there. They'd just assume he was off lecturing or at a conference somewhere or whatever.'

'Are the police looking into it?'

'No, I told you, she doesn't want to involve the police. Not at this stage.'

'Anybody else?'

Uncle Toby smiled benignly, not missing a beat.

'Not that I've heard.'

Not the sort of question you would expect a straight answer to.

'And she wants me to . . .'

'Yes.'

'I'm not sure I can help much. I can't get access to things like the police can. Bank records. Surveillance stuff, traffic, shopping malls. Forensics.'

'No need, dear boy, no need. I'm sure it won't come to that.'

'So where do I fit in?'

'Did you ever?' Uncle Toby smiled again.

Plant was taken a back. Mildly. But nonetheless still surprised. Not Uncle Toby's usual mode of discourse. Smart comments generally suppressed, assuming he thought them.

'I see your role as more in the shadows.'

'Not fitting in.'

'Indeed. Anything you might come across, things you hear, you know, discreetly.'

'And what is there to hear?'

'Well, the dear girl has a point, unfortunately. He was in good health, good spirits.'

'So you're saying it wasn't on the cards that he was going to vanish. Or suicide.'

'Highly unlikely.'

'But she won't go to the police.'

'It hasn't come to that yet. It's probably all clear cut and he's off somewhere writing his book.' He tailed off. 'But on the off chance . . .'

'Just to be safe.'

'Something like that,' Uncle Toby agreed.

'He was one of those who went away. Good student. Good enough. Not brilliant. But brilliance isn't the issue. Staying power, that's what's needed. Staying power and drive. And he had that. He saw the opportunities. Scholarship to the U.K. Got himself in position there. Provincial university. But a good one. With one of those institutes, you know. Renaissance Studies Institute. Centre for Media Studies. That sort of thing.'

'Aren't they a bit different? Renaissance studies, the media?'

'He was a polymath.'

'Ah,' Plant said.

'You take the platform available.'

'And take off.'

'In Tim's case certainly. He was bright. Eager. Charming fellow.'

Uncle Toby seemed about to lapse into introspection, gazing out over the stretching ocean to lost time.

'Like all those eager young Englishmen, he got himself hired to teach a summer school in the States. All the bright ones went for that. Paid well. Put them in the running for a permanent position there.'

'In the States.'

'Yes. Which in due course he obtained.'

'In due course.'

'Yes.'

'Was that routinely or belatedly or just par for the course?'

'Does it matter?'

'It might.'

'I think you'd have to look up the records. I don't think I could

give you a precise time line.'

'What records?'

'Well, his curriculum vitae, I imagine.'

'Do you have a copy?'

'Why would I have a copy?'

'An old friend. A former student. Someone you've written the occasional reference for. You presumably have the information somewhere.'

'Ah, presumably. But whether I could find it is another issue.'

Plant tried the old unflinching gaze. Uncle Toby returned it.

'You'd find it all in *Who's Who* I'm sure. Or on the internet. But if you have any difficulty . . .'

'What about an obituary?'

'A trifle premature, surely.'

'You haven't written one? Kept on file?'

'Not I.'

'Can't necessarily trust them, of course.'

'What can you trust?' Uncle Toby asked, smiling, almost beaming.

'Not much,' Plant agreed.

'Discretion,' Uncle Toby said. 'But I'm sure you'll bear that in mind.'

Down on the beach there was a flurry of activity as the lifesavers saved another tourist from drowning. Uncle Toby gazed down admiringly from the window.

'Say what you like about surveillance,' he said, 'but if there hadn't been someone out there watching that could have been another fatality.'

Chapter Two

The glorious sunshine that so cheered Uncle Toby had been replaced the following day by a grey, lowering cloud mass, promising rain but so far resulting only in drizzle. The drizzle dappled the car windscreens, coated the trees with a fine gauze, settled on the roads and pavements, a steely, slaty grey reflecting the grey of the clouds. Plant turned off the road and headed along a driveway. A guard hut stood there like a set piece from one of those Cold War spy stories.

A gated community. Like a medieval city but with the gates closed twenty-four hours, not just at night time. An intimation of the ongoing collapse of social values? One of those rhetorical questions you don't expect an answer to, or whose answer you already know.

Plant stopped where instructed by the signs. The security guard in the guard hut gave him a hard look.

'I've an appointment with Mrs Vicars.'

'And your name, sir.'

'Plant.'

'That would be Mister?'

Plant agreed.

How many lords and earls did they get here? Or maybe it was doctors and medical specialists with academic appointments, professors and associate professors. Maybe there were a lot of sick residents.

Or maybe they were all criminals and were regularly visited by Detective Sergeant this and Detective Inspector that. Or military, for that matter. Captain or colonel or knight at arms.

Or the question might just have been following some instruction on gender discrimination, do not categorise on sight, do not

make assumptions.

The security guard phoned through to Mrs Vicars.

She gave authorisation.

The guard gave Plant directions.

Plant thanked him.

Somehow things like this always induced anxiety and made Plant feel sick on the stomach. Border crossings. Guard posts. He'd seen security compounds in the Philippines. He'd seen them in the U.S.A. Now he was seeing them in Australia. Someone had been marketing fear to sell property. Or responding to a need the fear implored. Terror. Paranoia.

Maybe it wasn't his own anxiety making him feel sick, maybe he was picking up on the terror that surrounded him, that needed the guard post. But did the terror stop at the guard post? Did that gesture of security keep it out? Or did it sit like a miasma over the roads and lawns and around the grey town houses?

He drove down a narrow roadway, blocks of town houses set back with their own access lanes. He went down one of them, past a group of half a dozen houses, and stopped at the number the security guard had given him. A garage door, closed, wide enough for two cars, a courtyard with a high, solid wooden gate. He pressed the buzzer beside it. The drizzle dropped on his head and shoulders. A dog barked.

The buzzer buzzed back and Plant pushed open the gate into the courtyard. A cluster of terracotta pots with basil and oregano and chilli. A couple of bicycles draped in a tarpaulin. The dog barked again from within the house, a deep, resonant bark.

'Kim,' a voice said inside, a female voice, 'don't be so rude.'

And then the sound of a bolt being drawn back and a lock clicking open and a chain being unhooked.

Tall, slim, hair pulled back severely in a long plait, everything black, shoes, shirt, trousers, hair. Had Vicars been found dead? Black was hardly Gold Coast norm. Looked good though, so maybe it was a fashion statement. Or the uniform of one of those dubious jobs where appearance was essential to mask the underlying dodginess of it, lawyer or banker.

'Come in, why don't you,' she said.

Kim bared his teeth and snarled under his breath, claws clamped firmly on the entrance step. Alsatian, German Shepherd, something fierce, whatever they called them.

'I had a friend who always carried a few dog biscuits in his pocket. He'd feed them to any dog he encountered. Gain their enduring gratitude.'

'A basic requirement in your line of business, I would have thought,' she said. 'Like for postmen. I'll give you some of Kim's. Remind me before you go.'

He had only just got there and she was onto the topic of his going, Plant noted. Had he noted it from injured pride, vanity and such like, or as an investigator's routine observation? Why not both?

She held the dog by its collar and let Plant in. Apart from the white ceiling, a predominant impression of grey, grey walls and fabrics, glass table, modern alienated concrete, glass and steel feel. Spotless. Ordered or sterile? Again, why not both?

There was a huge television. A home entertainment unit. No bookshelves. Not a book in sight. Nor a magazine or newspaper. The contemporary paper free home. No CDs either. Everything presumably latest high tech. Unless it was conforming to some strict religious sect's code of a pollution free environment, refusing the temptations and corruptions of the worlds of print and music.

'Thank you for coming.'

Plant smiled and nodded.

She smiled back. Slim. Straight. The good prefect look. A bit severe. But with the potential to open up, break out. In Plant's scenarios of imaginary worlds. Attractive but reserved. Though whether naturally reserved or just reserved with Plant, he didn't know her well enough to tell. Many people seemed reserved when he tried to speak to them, Plant knew. Nonetheless he would pick her as a naturally reserved person. So now she was doubly reserved. Just his luck. Like getting blood out of a stone, as his mother used to say.

They could have sat there silent all morning, maybe. But Plant had things to do. Get home and cool it in the sun.

'So tell me from the beginning.'

'Didn't Professor Oates tell you?'

'Not really. Just that you were anxious.'

'Anxious? I'm worried sick. I haven't heard from Tim for three weeks.'

'Would he have any reason to disappear?'

'Of course he did. But why hasn't he phoned me? That's what worries me.'

'You haven't heard from him. But you think he has reason to disappear.'

'Of course he has. After that business at the university.'

'What business was that?'

'Don't you know? It was all over the internet. It was sickening.'

She went over to the sink in the kitchen and rinsed her hands with an expression of distaste. Pursed lips. Sniff.

'I guess I missed it,' Plant said.

'Would you like coffee?' she asked, disregarding his admission of ignorance, getting the preliminaries settled.

'Yes,' Plant said, 'please.'

It was one of the things he had given up. He was always glad

when it was offered to him and it would seem impolite to refuse.

She ground the coffee beans. Kim who had been curled up peacefully sat up and barked in annoyance. Not that you could confidently pick a dog's emotions, but annoyance was a fair enough reaction. Plant could understand annoyance. It was a hideous racket.

The grinding ceased. Kim returned to sleep, or simulation of it. The coffee was under way.

'So,' Plant said.

'I'm worried sick,' she said.

'When did you last see him?'

'Last see him? It must be nearly a month ago.'

'Quite a while.'

'When he went back to Sydney. But I spoke to him on the phone after that.'

'So when did you last speak on the phone.'

'Three weeks ago.'

'Have you told the police?'

She stood there, lips pursed, as if possessed by some force preventing her from speaking.

'Not after all that trouble,' she said at last.

'Trouble?'

'Didn't Professor Oates tell you?'

'Tell me what?'

Kim gave a growl of annoyance.

'About the emails and stuff.'

'No, tell me.'

'It was all over the internet,' she said again.

'I must have missed it.'

'I can't see how,' she said, with some annoyance, as if he were some recalcitrant third former.

Outside there was a steady drizzle of rain, blanking out any view from the windows, just the unrelieved grey of the low clouds and the grey reflections of the water puddling on the grey concrete paths and gravel.

'He was such a fool,' she said. 'Yabbering on in emails to his stupid friends.'

'What about?'

'Not about anything,' she said.

'So what was the problem?'

'The forbidden words.'

'Which are they?'

'They're forbidden.'

'But he used them.'

'Satirically,' she said. 'Ironically. Privately. Whatever. But you can't do that.'

'So what happened?'

'Someone hacked into his email account and published them on the internet.'

'Why?'

She shook her head.

'Did he have enemies?'

'Oh, heavens, yes.'

'Why was that?'

'People were envious of him.'

'Why?'

'A successful career. Apparently.'

'Anything else?'

'Lots, probably. He could seem arrogant.'

'Was he?'

She reflected for a moment.

'Yes.'

'What was he doing at university?'

'Working on social policy issues.'

'And what are they?'

'Freedom of the internet. Decriminalisation of marijuana.'

Uncle Toby had told him. But it was nice to have it confirmed. Useful anyway.

Kim gave another growl. Disgust. Or warning. Or indigestion.

'For or against? Plant asked.

'For, I imagine.'

'You're not sure.'

'You could never be sure of anything with Tim.'

'He didn't discuss these issues with you?'

'Oh, heavens, yes. Constantly.'

'But?'

'But by the time he'd gone at it from every angle and every objection and every paradoxical effect and unintended fucking consequence your head was reeling. Mine was, I can tell you.'

She reeled from side to side, her tongue hanging out.

'Could his position, his line, have annoyed someone?'

'Probably. He could be pretty annoying.'

'Enough to hack into his emails?'

'I don't know. I really don't know.'

'And do you know what the emails said?'

'Racist and sexist and homophobic stuff. Anything you're not allowed to say. All those slang expressions and smutty sneers men used to go on with. Still do, obviously.'

'Were those his attitudes?'

'Not really.'

'So why would he have . . . ?'

'Said that stuff?'

'Yes.'

'Because you're not allowed to. So it becomes a sort of private running joke about the political correctness of the boring people you work with.'

'And that's why he wrote them.'

'I imagine,' she said.

'Just on principle.'

'Just out of cussedness,' she said. 'Letting off steam. What you can't say at a staff meeting. It didn't mean anything.'

'And you think this might be connected with his disappearance.'

'Well, they suspended him.'

'With pay?'

'Yes. But he was banned from the university grounds. Banned from the library.'

'For how long?'

'Till his contract runs out at the end of the year.'

'And then?'

'Then he's out.'

'No renewal.'

She laughed. 'You're joking.'

'I see. Would that have upset him?'

'Getting full pay? No. Being banned from the grounds? Possibly. I don't know how much he needed the university. The physical place. I mean, he could carry on working anywhere without going in there.'

'From here?'

'From the place he had in Sydney. Or here, yes.'

'Would the email leaks have made his work difficult? I mean, had he sort of . . .'

'Blown it?'

'Lost credibility, lost access?'

'I should have thought so,' she said. 'Wouldn't you? How could he be so fucking stupid?'

'Was he upset when they suspended him?'

'What do you think?'

'I don't know. That's why I'm asking.'

'What makes you ask?'

'Well . . . ' Plant floundered. He put his coffee cup down on the coaster on the coffee table. What had made him ask? Well, he just wanted to know. But wasn't it pretty obvious how Vicars would feel? Pissed off, shocked, shamed, hurt, embattled, revengeful, enraged. No, it wasn't obvious at all if you thought about it. Or even if you weren't thinking about it. There was a range of possible reactions.

'Because it's funny actually. Well, not funny, not at all, though . . .'

'Though what?'

'Well, funny. It was as if he was amused. In between being pissed off. He had that smirk of his. As if he was up to something.'

'So he wasn't upset.'

'He was, what's the word they use now, he was conflicted.'

'Conflicted.'

'He was pretty devastated. He could see it was going to be a prob-

lem. In terms of the job. But he was over it pretty much. The job. You'd have thought he would have been utterly humiliated. But no.'

'He wasn't?'

'No. He just laughed. He went on about feeling this incredible sense of relief. No more sad contagion of the gown, he kept on saying.'

'As if he was glad to be out of it?'

'No "as if",' she said. 'He was glad.'

'To be out of a job?'

'I think so. Pissed off, but at the same time glad it was over.'

'So,' Plant said again, 'sorry to be laborious about this but just so that I've got it straight, you live here and your husband is, or was, working in Sydney.'

'Yes.'

Plant tried giving her the look. The interrogator.

She was impassive. Impervious.

'So?'

So indeed. Plant floundered. So is this contemporary marriage? Is this an amicable separation, born of the necessities of a successful career? How could he ask anything without seeming offensive. Being offensive.

'It's a distinguished visiting professorship in Sydney,' she said. 'Just for the year. Before that he was working up here.'

'A university position.'

'Yes.'

'For how long?'

'Three years. Before that we were in the States.'

'And you didn't move down to Sydney.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Not just for a year.'

Kim barked.

'That's right, Kim,' she said. 'Because of you. We didn't want to give up this place. And it's hard to get rental properties with a dog and an apartment would have been impossible, wouldn't it my little darling? You can't keep a dog locked up in an apartment.'

She bent over and rubbed her face into Kim's furry neck. Plant felt his nostrils itching.

'So it seemed easier if I just stayed here and Tim got a small apartment there, and he'd come back up here every two or three weeks or so for a long weekend, three or four days. That suited us. He could get on with his work without distractions in Sydney.'

'And you?'

'Me?' she said. 'Oh, same deal. We're very organised, aren't we, Kim?'

Kim grunted.

Outside the drizzle was thickening to a light rain which blotted out everything through the windows. Maybe there was nothing there. But even absence was obliterated now.

'So if they'd suspended him from Sydney, what was he doing down there? If he wasn't allowed on campus, why didn't he come back up here?'

'You tell me,' she said.

Meaning she had no idea? Or she knew very well, but it was for Plant to put it into words.

'But that's where he is?'

'I don't know where he is.'

'That's where he was when you last heard from him.'

'I don't know. I thought so. But he could have been anywhere.

How can you tell with a phone call?'

'What about friends? Have any of them heard from him?'

'What friends?' she asked. Dismissively, it seemed to Plant.

'The ones he was emailing.'

'Oh those sad old tossers. They're all overseas. Over the hill and far away. They wouldn't know anything.'

'Have you asked them?'

'No.'

'Maybe you should.'

'What, in case he's fled the country? His passport's still here.'

'So you've no idea where he might be?'

'Of course not. I've already told you. If I knew I wouldn't be asking you, would I?'

'Makes it difficult,' Plant said.

'I hardly know anyone in Sydney,' she said. 'Or here, for that matter.'

She was crouched down beside Kim, snuggling up to him, burying her face in his fur. She could have been weeping. Or laughing.

'We've been living in the States and the U.K. for years.'

'But you come from here.'

'Aeons ago.'

'And Tim has no old friends.'

'Not these days.'

'And in the past?'

'I doubt it. Useful contacts, maybe. He wasn't into friendship *per se*.'

'Rungs not friends,' Plant offered, some memory bubbling up from the depths.

'It has been said,' she said.

'Sorry.'

'No need to apologise.'

And there wasn't. Apologise for a cliché, forget it.

'There's no one you can think of he might be staying with.'

'No.'

It was uncompromisingly peremptory.

'Or place he might hide out. Childhood holiday house. Ancestral home in the hills.'

She shook her head.

'Has he ever done this before? Gone off alone somewhere without saying?'

'No.'

'Gone off with someone else?'

'No.'

Again it was peremptory, perfunctory. He was not sure if he believed her.

'There's not much to go on.'

'No, there isn't, is there?' she agreed.

'How was your relationship with your husband?'

She looked up like an indignant bird, one of the smaller ones, interrupted in eating crumbs.

'It was fine,' she said.

'Fine.'

'Yes.'

'I have to ask these things.'

'I don't think you do.'

'Maybe not.'

This could be when she asked him to leave and terminated any arrangement with him. But she just stood there silent.

'It would help to eliminate problems.'

'And I'm a problem.'

'Well, to whittle it down. Whoever he might have been running away from. So if I can eliminate you . . .'

'Go ahead,' she said. 'Eliminate me.'

She sounded as if she might have said it before. Or something similar.

'And then whether he was running away from the email business.'

'Wouldn't you?'

' . . . or something connected with the social policy issues he was working on. Like decriminalising marijuana. Who was he involved with on that? Or whose toes had he trodden on? Same with the internet issues. A lot of money involved.'

She nodded. Some sort of agreement.

'You think the mafia or some Silicon Valley types might have come and kidnapped him?'

The mockery in her tone was unconcealed.

'Somebody caused him a lot of strife by leaking his emails. So if that wasn't just good clean fun, there was some heavy malice behind it.'

'Heavy malice,' she said. 'Sounds like a rock group.'

'It could be serious.'

'I know. I'm sorry. I can't . . .'

She reached for a box of tissues on the kitchen bench. Expensive ones. Not home brand.

'If I let myself think about how serious it is . . .'

She blew her nose loudly two or three times. Kim lay on the floor

licking his genitals.

' . . . I'll just crack up.'

Which might have been a way of avoiding further questions. Or a true expression of distress and grief. Or both.

The grieving, attractive widow. The seduction of mourning. Stock in trade of the business Plant was in. According to the books. He kept himself at a distance. Emotionally. Withdrawing deeper inside his shell. Retracting the hairs on his arms and anything else retractable.

'Where was he living in Sydney?'

'Oh, near the university somewhere.'

'You don't know?'

'No. I never went there. Because of Kim. I didn't want to board him. And I couldn't take him. So it wasn't an issue.'

'Do you have the address?'

'Of course.'

'What is it?'

'I'll have to look it up.'

'And his phone number.'

She managed to remember that.

'I'll need a photograph, too.'

'I'll go and look,' she said and disappeared upstairs. Plant gazed through the glass sliding doors at the rain. It was getting heavier. Maybe it had reached down to his five acres and was filling up his water tank. Dependence on tank water had quite changed his attitude to rain. Looking out at the steady grey downpour was quite cheering. Looked at in the right way.

Plant checked out the email story at a computer in an internet café at

Surfers Paradise. Outrage erupted from the screen. The guardians of conformity were so appalled at Vicar's language in his private emails that they publicised them in comprehensive detail. Suddenly they were able to utter all those frightful words they had always wanted to say but were too politically correct and mealy mouthed and hypocritical and downright devious ever to have dared enunciate. Now they could say them in quote marks. Like wearing a condom. Not even putting *sic* after them, that earlier mark of dissociation. How sick was that? he asked himself. Not something you could ask anyone else.

He drove back down the highway thinking about it all, as the semi-trailers roared by and the Winnebagos loitered and the caravans wobbled from lane to lane. He found her plait strangely alluring. It made her look like a somewhat mature schoolgirl, hormones bubbling beneath the gym slip. Did they still wear gym slips? It was all so long ago, all those unfulfilled desires, those inaccessible aspirations of those awful adolescent years. Was she hanging onto relics of them, plaiting her hair to time travel back from the stresses of maturity? Or was it more calculated than that, an ambiguous provocation? And the dog, what was that about, guarding his mistress's honour? Was that what needed protecting, inside the gated compound, with the guard hut and the no doubt armed guard, the triple locks and bolts, and Kim's threatening bark and bared teeth? Was all that security in place to protect Vicars who had gone missing despite it all? Or to keep his wife in some sort of purdah? Or was Mrs Vicars just a quivering anxiety case, fearful and alone there? Or was there some other agenda? Possibly. There often was. He went back to thinking about the plait, the time it must take to braid it all up, and the time it would take to unplait it and let it all hang loose.

Chapter Three

Sydney was where Vicars had apparently last been heard from so Sydney was where Plant went, driving down the Pacific Highway for eleven hours and staying with Fullalove. It saved paying for a motel, though Plant had increasing doubts about whether it was such a good idea. It was a sort of pay back for having Fullalove stay up on the lantana farm. A retribution, even. But apart from the wisdom of seeking retribution, there were the health and safety issues. Cockroaches as opposed to bush rats. Botulism rather than brown snakes.

Apart from these issues, there was the problem of access. Fullalove's inner city hovel had become ridiculous. The hallway was stacked with books, piled one on top of another, as if bookcases had never been invented. And having negotiated access, it was to find every room similarly stuffed with books, some on shelves, but most in cardboard boxes or stacked against the walls. The hovel had always been stuffed with conspiracy theories, cold war espionage narratives, analyses of imperialist adventures and Islamic resistance, histories of the secret services of the world and so on. Now, from what Plant could see as he squeezed past the open boxes, the holdings had expanded to include political philosophy, pornography and manuals of sexual deviance. Or maybe the varieties of sexual experience. Plant was unclear in his mind as to whether deviance was a superseded category in official pluralism, or had been reinstated.

'This is ridiculous,' Plant complained, standing in the hallway, peering into the allegedly spare room. No other word for it. Not one he could think of, anyway.

'No it's not.'

'It's madness. It's an obsession.'

'No, man, it's a goldmine. Look at it.'

Plant looked at it.

'Anyway, what's wrong with obsession? Without it where would the great collections come from? Books, art, antiquities, shrunken heads, you name it.'

Plant declined to name any more of it.

'It's worse than ever,' he said.

'No it's not. It's better. A quantum leap. I had a vision.'

'Don't tell me.'

But Fullalove told him.

'The book is mightier than the sword.'

'Sounds reassuring. Go on.'

'I'm going to start buying books.'

'You already have. The place is full of them.'

'They're merely personal, pretty much,' Fullalove said. 'But now I'm getting into them commercially.'

'Where are you going to put them?'

'Rent a self-storage space eventually.'

'When you can no longer move in this place.'

'Yes.'

'Could be any day soon.'

'It could,' Fullalove agreed, with evident satisfaction.

'Go on. Tell me. What books are you going to buy?'

'Old books. Second hand books. All the dodgy stuff. Politics. Pornography. Art books, too, maybe. Because the time is coming when they're going to say books are obsolete. Like photographic film. Vinyl. Everything's going to be digitised. And maybe it will be but probably not. But the point is, once things are digitised they can be monitored. Like your phone and internet and emails and library borrowings and travel card. All recorded. And the data all retrievable.'

'Uh-huh,' Plant grunted. 'Go on.'

Though Fullalove needed no encouragement.

'So, mate, who's going to borrow a library copy or order an e-book of *Capital* or *The Story of O* or *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or *Socialism Utopian and Scientific* or *Fanny Hill* or *Mein Kampf*? You want to read those books, but you don't want to leave any record. Olympia Press stuff, the *Kama Sutra*, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater, Junky* . . . You don't want to lose your job, open yourself up to blackmail, get yourself on a watch list for life.'

'Uh-huh.'

'There's going to be a market for all this stuff. The ever expanding list of the politically incorrect. *Huckleberry Finn, The Nigger of the Narcissus, The Gollywog's Cakewalk.* CDs as well as books. For people who would prefer not to be dependent on having their music streamed from some malign internet source.'

'Malign?'

'It would have to be, so much money involved. Anyway, just to stick with books for the time being, think of it. Left wing, right wing, classic sex and drugs, books you don't want someone being able to tell your wife or your husband or your boss or your local copper that you've been reading. It's all recorded, library borrowings, e-books, internet searches and downloads. The information is going to be used. Inevitably. It already is. Recruitment agencies, head hunters for executive jobs, they trawl through all that information like they trawl through antisocial media.

'So, I'm collecting books. Traditional, secure, old fashioned books in hard copies. Kraft-Ebbing and Kinsey and *The Happy Hooker* and *Lolita* and *Beautiful Losers* and *The Gingerman*. All the stuff they used to ban, and all the stuff that poured out when they stopped banning books. The important thing is not to make any value judgments about it. The stuff doesn't have to be any good. I mean, you don't have to feel you ought to read it. Just figure out the way society is being

pushed and work out what is going to be deemed unacceptable.'

'You're saying all this stuff is going to be banned again? Like they used to ban *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and . . .'

'No, not banned, man. The days of censorship by the authoritarian state are over. No, everything's going to be available. But on the internet, so it's all monitored. By the same authoritarian state. Now it's all about entrapment. Now you can get anything you want on the internet and get yourself put on a police or security watch list as soon as you look it up. How's that for an advance in civil liberties? They want to have something over you. Like registering that you read subversive or dirty or misogynistic books. E-books from your local library or your home computer. But it'll be phased out in hard copies. They won't be reprinting it. What I'm going to be catering for is people who aren't going to want anyone knowing they've been reading that stuff. Especially paranoia and conspiracy stuff. Real paranoiacs aren't going to use the internet or e-books.

'All that leftist stuff publishers pumped out in the sixties and seventies. Desperate to make a killing from the student radical market. Amazing what you can still pick up. Jack Lindsay's *Turner*, Christopher Hill's *Winstanley*, William Morris, Jack London. So I figure, get it while I can. Before some other fucker gets the idea.

'The surveillance society, it's like prohibition. Creates an opportunity. Think how much the Kennedys made from prohibition. People don't believe it's going to happen. But it's already happening. So the cluey entrepreneur of the future will take this on board and make a killing.'

'And that's you?'

'Sure is.'

'And these are metaphors, are they? Mixed as they are. You're not planning on actually killing anyone. You're not taking up arms against the surveillance society?'

'I'm embracing it,' Fullalove said, with a positive enthusiasm Plant had never seen him show before. 'No point complaining like a liberal wanker about what's not allowed. The answer is, get out there and supply it. That way you're fighting the system and making a fortune.'

'Like drug dealing,' Plant said.

'Got it,' Fullalove agreed. 'A cash-sales only, second-hand book business. Think of all the stuff the feminists denounced. D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer. Think of those right wingers you don't want people to know you want to read – Céline, Knut Hamsun, Henry Williamson. Think of the left wingers, Mao, Ho-chi Minh, Philby's *My Silent War*. Think of all the Islamic stuff.'

'Fair enough,' Plant said.

'Doesn't matter whether it's fair or unfair. It's a market. Which is currently unprovided for. Plain brown paper bag trade. Anything people mightn't want people knowing they're reading.'

'That's a wide field.'

'You bet it is. I can see money. You won't be able to get most of this stuff except on-line. Libraries have purged it out or put it in storage. Shops won't stock it any more.'

'But you will.'

'You bet. Cash sales only. No records kept.'

'Except by you.'

'No way. I'm not going to keep records and get caught up in some witch hunt when they're out to nail some poor bugger. Best to know nothing.'

It was like the old days when the world was wide, happily stoned in the early morning sunlight, visions of an amazing future, projects, schemes, fantasies, all glistening in the sun and dancing along the tops of the cars parked in the street. So what if it was just one of a myriad of unrealised dreams, yet another iridescent bubble destined to burst. One day one dream would survive and be fulfilled. Maybe.

You had to believe it.

'Smart thinking,' Plant said.

'Got to be ahead of the game.'

'And no one else has thought of this?'

'Dunno. Not that I've heard.'

'What about the security services?'

'What about them?'

'They must have a contingency plan.'

'For what?'

'To stop people like you. Like installing a surveillance camera across the road from your shop.'

'Warehouse.'

'Warehouse. Monitor everyone who calls by.'

Fullalove sniffed.

'Or even better,' Plant said, fired with enthusiasm, 'they might set up in competition.'

'Oh yeah? And why would they do that?'

'To buy up all the dodgy books and incinerate them. They've probably already started. You'd better build up your stock while it's still available.'

'No worries,' Fullalove said. 'Be cool if they did. That'll just create scarcity. So I can charge more, can't I? So I'm stock-piling while the stuff's still around. This stuff's going to appreciate in value like you wouldn't believe.'

When Plant awoke in the morning he found Fullalove already up and active, sitting at the scrubbed pinewood kitchen table with a pile of marijuana in front of him, Bob Marley on the old CD player. He was holding the heads up to the window, turning them round in

the dim light, fixing them with meticulous attention. Having passed scrutiny they were deposited in one of the glass jars lined up on the table, old jars once containing Kalamata olives or pickled onions, the odours still hanging in the air around them. Along with what Raymond Chandler called 'the honeyed reek of well-cured marijuana.' Picking up a pinch of leaf, he would separate the strands individually, deposit them on a sheet of shining aluminium foil and move them around, pushing them gently to one side and pushing something else he separated from them to the other side.

'Dog hairs,' he said as Plant peered over his shoulder.

'Is that the latest?' Plant asked. 'I've heard of licking frogs. But the hair of the dog? Is that what the phrase means? That they're psychotropic?'

'No.'

'So why are you collecting them?'

'I'm not. I'm getting rid of them.'

'Where from?'

'They're all through the dope.'

'Are they dangerous?'

'Dunno. Maybe. Allergies. Dog viruses. Penetrate your lungs.'

'Aren't you worried?'

'Worried enough not to smoke them.'

He worked away at his quality control, spreading the leaf out thinly, moving the hairs over to one side with the tip of his index finger.

'Better than rat droppings, though.'

'You're not serious.'

'You prefer rat droppings?'

'Rat droppings?'

'All through the last batch.'

'You don't mean that dope we were smoking . . .'

Fullalove laughed. He watched Plant's anxiety with unconcealed delight.

'You're so fucking irresponsible,' Plant said, less in rage than despair.

Fullalove seemed offended.

'I'm picking the hairs out, aren't I? What else can I do?'

'You said rat droppings.'

'Nah, not this lot. That was the last time you were down when the rats had got into it.'

Plant looked round the kitchen in apprehension, distaste, despair.

'What, you're telling me this place has got rats too?'

'What do you mean, "too"?'

'On top of everything else.'

'There isn't anything else.'

'Books, silverfish, cockroaches . . .'

'Everyone has cockroaches. It's the mark of urban living. They were here aeons before us. Don't need oxygen . . .'

'I know, I know,' Plant said. Wailed, even. 'But rat droppings . . .'

Those old photographs of Sydney in the 1920s, groups of waistcoated, cloth-capped rat-catchers standing on the inner city streets, the carcases of scores of rats laid out before them, the last time the plague had struck. Or the last time it got reported.

'I don't have rats, mate. This isn't parliament house. No, they were in it when I bought it.'

'Rats? You bought a load of dope with rats in it?'

'Just the droppings, for heaven's sake. What would I want to buy rats for?'

'I dread to think.'

'Anyway,' Fullalove assured him, 'I don't think they were eating it. Just nosing around. Or making nests.'

'I don't care whether they were eating it.'

'No worries, then.'

'You mean the whole lot was contaminated with rat turds?'

'Not really. Just little pellets of shit. Solid. it wasn't like rat diarrhoea or anything. It hadn't soaked in.'

'Now you tell me.'

'I didn't want to worry you. Anyway, there was nothing to worry about. I just picked them out. You wouldn't want to smoke them. I got most of them out, I reckon.'

'Most.'

'Well, you can't really guarantee a hundred per cent. You always miss some. Inevitable.'

'Great.'

'Don't worry. The grass was fine. It wasn't contaminated. Anyway, smoking it, the heat would kill off any bacteria, wouldn't it? Microbes and stuff. Parasites.'

Plant stood shaking his head. It was beyond words.

'Don't worry, mate. It's cool now. They've got dogs now.'

'Who've got dogs?'

'The folks growing it. They got these dogs and the rats have gone away. Driven out. Or eaten. Whatever. But the downside is the dogs shed hair like, I dunno, what sheds hair?'

'I don't know,' Plant said.

'Whatever it's like, that's how they shed it. It gets everywhere. They must roll around in it while it's being dried or something. So I've been picking the hairs out. As far as I can. Much harder to see than rat droppings.'

Chapter Four

Plant gave a summary of what he knew about Vicars from Uncle Toby and Mrs Vicars. It didn't amount to much.

'You reckon he's dead?' Fullalove asked.

'I don't see why.'

'Suicide. The shame of it. Suspension. So, suspension.'

'Does he sound like the suicide type to you?'

'Probably not. More like a murder victim from the sound of him.'

'Are you serious?'

'Don't know,' Fullalove said. 'These ideas just flow through the ether and you hear them with the inner ear and pass them on. But who knows?'

'Why didn't his wife go to the police?'

'Why didn't you ask her?'

'I did. She said there'd been enough embarrassment without adding to it.'

'Embarrassment.'

'So she said. Fair enough. But . . . '

'He was up to something dodgy.'

'You reckon?'

'Why else wouldn't she have reported him missing? She must be worried stiff. Unless she knows something.'

'Like where he might be.'

'If she knew that she wouldn't need you. No, she knows he's involved in something or other.'

'Though she mightn't know what it is.'

'Exactly,' Fullalove agreed.

'So what would it be?'

'Sex. Drugs. Money. Spookery.'

'Spookery?'

'With Uncle Toby in the background, what else could it be?'

'I'd wondered,' Plant said.

'Decriminalising marijuana. Freedom of the internet. That's what he was working on?'

'So they said.'

'Hot topics. Lots of money involved.'

'Sure. But I don't see how they tie in with his emails being hacked and all that business.'

'It's all politics,' Fullalove said. 'The words you're not allowed to use, the thoughts you're not allowed to think, the drugs you're not allowed to grow, the internet on which there's no censorship and everything is monitored.'

'It might be nothing to do with any of that. Maybe he's found some sexy student and run off with her.'

'Or him. Watch it, Plant. Don't discriminate against gays. You'll get yourself suspended.'

'I don't have a job to be suspended from. I can't suspend myself.'

'They'll make it look like you did,' Fullalove assured him. 'String you up and call it suicide.'

Plant looked at Fullalove in some puzzlement.

'That's a bit extreme, isn't it?'

'We live in extreme times.'

'That's true.'

'They require extreme solutions.'

Plant agreed. About the extreme times if not the extreme solu-

tions. Time for a smoke or two. He produced his stash. Sharing it with Fullalove was an expensive business. But until desperation struck he preferred to pass on the dog hairs.

'So who was his bit on the side?' Fullalove inhaled and asked.

'I don't know that there was one.'

'Of course there was. Leave the wife locked up on the reservation, come hunting and gathering down here.'

'Maybe.'

'Inevitable. All you've got to do is find out who it is.'

'It?'

'Gender unspecific. Keep an unprejudiced mind on this one.'

'All I've got to do is find out who it is?'

That's right.'

'And then I'll find him, all snuggled up with it?'

'Either that or dead.'

'Why do you keep saying he's dead?'

'Why would he be missing?'

'And this "it" will have all the answers?'

'Well, you don't have any.'

'True,' Plant agreed.

'Either all the answers or blood on its hands, or both. Unless the missus has gone and bumped them both off.'

Fullalove refused to let Plant check out Vicars on the internet.

'Everything's recorded. And that clown is sure to be flagged.'

'He's a clown now?' Plant queried.

'Anyone who writes stuff like that in an email is a clown, right?'

'And that's your definition of a clown?'

'Yes. Not a look-at-me performer with a white face and fuzzy hair. But the original idiot clod of a countryman. Etymologically speaking. Fools and clowns. Fools are smartarses. Clowns are dullards. The original bourgeois dismissal of primary producers. Yokels.'

'You're a mine of information.'

Fullalove smiled.

'What does it matter if he is flagged?' Plant asked.

'A lot. If someone was taking enough interest in him to hack into his emails and get him suspended, you've got to be careful. They mightn't be very nice people. No need to let them know you're interested in him. Otherwise they might get interested in you. Or me, given it's my computer. You don't know what's behind it all. They could be waiting to see who's interested.'

'So?'

'So if he's disappeared, whoever shows interest in him might be next. You want to disappear, use your own computer and they can come for you. But leave me out of it.'

'Fair enough,' Plant agreed.

Chapter Five

After a brief search Mrs Vicars had found the address of her husband's Sydney apartment and the key as well and handed them over to Plant. It was a walk-up three storey block not far from the university. Clean hallway. No graffiti. No generic smells of urine and vomit and stairs spiked with needles. No smell of death leaking out from beneath the door, no mutilated decaying body when Plant turned the key and opened the door.

In fact the body was in fine health, loose singlet and baggy shorts. Chubby. A bit chubbier than Plant's preferred tastes. Such discriminations were frowned upon. Not something to declare in email correspondence. But he still had them. Though he was willing to adapt. Always.

She screamed.

No one came running.

'Sorry,' Plant said, 'I should've knocked. I didn't think anybody would be in here.'

'Who the hell are you?'

'I'm looking for Professor Vicars,' Plant said, by way of identification. Need to know rules. 'Who are you?'

'You can't just barge in here like that.'

'I just did.'

'What do you think you're doing?'

'I'm looking for Professor Vicars.'

'He's not here.'

'Where is he?'

'Why?'

'He's not been heard from. His wife's worried.'

She made a dismissive snorting noise.

'This is his apartment?'

'Uh-huh.'

'You live here too?'

'None of your business,' she said.

'Probably not,' Plant agreed, 'but I need to ask a few questions to be sure.'

'Let me put some clothes on,' she said, disappearing into the bedroom. Presumably the bedroom. Too bad if it was a hidden exit.

Plant looked round the room he was in. Nordic noir from Ikea. Grey couch. Two grey chairs. Television. Table. No computer. No bookshelves. No scattering of books or newspapers on the table or couch. No paintings. No prints. No photographs. Very little to go on to get a sense of Vicars. Unless the charcoal grey couch and chairs, the off-white walls and ceiling, the monochrome blankness of it all was the expression of Vicars. Like the Gold Coast town house amidst the drizzling rain. Or, like the rain, was that just the cloak of invisibility in which he wrapped himself, before disappearing?

It was a relief, really. Not having to come to terms with the cultural assertions and artistic pretensions and overall accumulation of unnecessary objects that characterised many crime scenes. Potential crime scenes. Places he had had to go to. At least he did not suffer an involuntary visceral withdrawal from any look-at-me cultural displays at this one.

Nor from the occupant. She emerged all pink and blonde, brushed and dressed, white shirt with the top buttons unbuttoned, skin tight jeans clinging to her buttocks. Or was the provocation all in the eye of the beholder?

'Bess Birmingham,' she said.

'Plant.'

She gestured, carry on.

'I had no idea anyone was here.'

'So you normally just let yourself in to peoples' places?'

'In a missing persons inquiry when there seems no reason not to. I didn't know he was living with someone.'

'He's not.'

Plant absorbed that.

'But you're here.'

'No law against it,' she said. 'I'm staying here while he's away. My own place is too crowded right now.'

'Why's that?'

'I don't see that it's any of your business.'

'Probably not. But try me.'

'My flatmate's boyfriend seems to have moved in and he keeps trying to crack onto me.'

'So you've moved out.'

'He won't last. But Tim said I could stay here.'

'Nice of him.'

'Yes.'

'While he's away.'

'Yes.'

'Where's that?'

'No idea.'

'And when he comes back?'

'What?'

'You'll stay on? Or move back to your own place?'

'Depends on how much he's been missing it,' she said.

'The apartment?

'Sex.'

'Oh.'

'You know, what men and women get up to.'

'I had heard.'

'You've got noisy neighbours?' she asked.

'O. K., so you two were an item.'

'What's an item?'

'You got up to things that men and women get up to.'

'That doesn't make you an item,' she said. 'Didn't you know that?'

'Enlighten me.'

'You want a coffee?'

It was going to be a long enlightenment? Like the entire eighteenth century? Requiring caffeine? Plant was trying to live without it. The caffeine, not enlightenment. But he went along with the moment like he went along with most things unless he could think of a good reason not to, or to do something else. And he did miss it. The caffeine.

She busied herself at the coffee machine. Coffee machines rated like bicycles and gyms in Plant's demonology. Not that he was actively engaged in hurling them over heaven's battlement down to the fiery depths. But they figured as part of the iconography of consumerism and conformity and fetishism and pretension and conspicuous consumption and everything else that irritated him about the world around him. And he could assemble quite a list. He was well on the way to becoming a grumpy old man. Well, on the way, not necessarily well on the way. He could take remedial action. Love the world. He looked at Bess as she stood before the coffee machine, performing the required rites. All of 22 or 23, give or take five years either way. Not that chubby, really.

She let him sugar his own coffee. Three. That was why he had negative feelings towards coffee. When he was being told to cut down on sugar. And coffee. And everything else.

And there was Bess. 22 or 23 or whatever. And no need to cut down on anything.

'Sex,' she said.

'Yes.'

She laughed. 'You make it sound like "yes, please",' she said.

'You've got good hearing.'

'I am bespoke,' she said.

'Bespoke?'

'Spoken for.'

'As in booked?'

'I'm not on the game,' she said, not unprovocatively.

'I didn't say hired,' Plant said. He'd been struggling for the right word. *Occupé* didn't have the right ring. Nor did reserved. And here she was coming up with bespoke.

'You're a literature student?'

'Once upon a time.'

'And Professor Vicars is what? Your supervisor?'

'No, nothing like that. Nothing formal. Nothing academic. We're just fucking.'

'And very nice too.'

'Yes, she said, yes, she said, yes, et cetera,' she said.

'Right,' Plant said, 'we've got that clear.'

She smiled. Sweetly.

'And you don't know where he is now.'

'No.'

'He didn't say where he was going.'

'No.'

'Isn't that odd?'

'I just assumed he was going back up to Brisbane.'

'Why?'

'Seeing that wife of his.'

'You didn't ask.'

'Of course not.'

'Did he often go away?'

'Quite often.'

'Always back up to Brisbane?'

'I don't know. No. No, he'd be off to Melbourne. Canberra. I didn't take a lot of notice.'

'He didn't talk about it.'

'No.'

'You've no idea what he was doing.'

'Giving seminars, I suppose. Conferences. What do academics usually do?'

'And you haven't heard from him.'

'No.'

'Not a phone call.'

'No.'

'Did he usually call when he was away?'

'No.'

'Was he worried about being suspended?'

'No. He thought he was onto a good thing.'

'Like what?'

'A massive compensation case.'

'He thought he'd win?'

'He was sure.'

'So all the media publicity, it didn't worry him.'

'Tim? No. Water off a duck's back.'

'So he wasn't depressed.'

'No. Not at all. He said he had a great feeling of relief.'

'Had he planned it?'

'Planned what?'

'Getting suspended. Getting compensation.'

She thought for a bit.

'I wouldn't think so,' she said. 'It's not that cut and dried. You'd have to be pretty devious.'

She grinned.

'Mind you, he can be that.'

'Devious?'

'Devious,' she said. 'Part of his charm. Sometimes.'

'So what are your plans?'

'Mine? I'll stay here till he turns up. If I go back that bozo will crack onto me one time too many and she'll walk in and catch us at it and then she'll storm off and leave me with the whole fucking rent which I can't afford.'

'Let me know if he gets in touch,' Plant said, giving her his card. Research assistance, investigative reporting.

She took it without looking at it.

'I need to have a quick look round,' Plant said.

'Be my guest,' she offered. Proprietarily. Or just an American idiom she'd picked up.

No landline or answer phone. No address book on the desk. No way of establishing his network of contacts. No indication of where he might be. If he had a mobile phone or computer he had presumably taken them with him wherever he might have gone. Unless someone else had. No sign of a break in. Windows all secure. No broken door jambs. No significant scratches around the lock.

No stash of dope, either. Not in the underwear drawer, not in the lavatory cistern, not in the fridge. No rolling papers. Nothing to indicate this advocate of decriminalisation was campaigning from any personal involvement or interest. Not even an ashtray. Maybe he used a saucer as an ashtray. Maybe he made hash cookies. No indications. No packets of cake mix. No reason to believe he was a slave of the weed. No reason to believe he was advocating decriminalisation, maybe he was just studying the pros and cons. Or maybe he was very paranoid and very careful.

No indications of anything very much. Nothing in the fridge except mineral water. Had he cleaned up before he left, or did he never eat anything? And what did Bess live on?

Why would any self-respecting academic, or even one with low self-esteem, undertake a project on marijuana? On legalising it? Unless he was into it. Plant remembered how in his postgraduate years he had been excited to hear that one of the science departments was researching cannabis and asking for experimental volunteers. He had enough of a self-protective instinct not to put his name forward. Grass was easy enough to obtain. No need to register your dependency. In due course it emerged the research was in order to develop a breathalyser test to add to the alcohol breathalysers the police were already issued with. Clearly not the sort of project to engage in. But what other sort of project would a university sanction? Could it possibly be that Vicars' line on decriminalisation was for the spread of well-being and universal happiness? Everybody must get stoned? Nice to think so. But really, not very likely.

Chapter Six

Plant recalled the university as a site of youth and carefree sensuality. But so were a lot of sites when you were young. It didn't feel like that any more. Not to Plant, no longer young. The students looked excessively youthful. Plant averted his eyes. To look at them invited arrest for potential paedophilia. Or offensive looking. Looking, offensive or not, was pretty well disallowed from what he'd read and heard.

The walk across campus to the library brought it all back. Or enough of it, in poignant ambiguity. The lure of the library. Those years of graduate study that failed to deliver any hoped for job but that gave him the taste for books, research, inquiry, discovery.

The campus had been beautified. At vast expense. Wide, military style ceremonial walkways or march ways had been established like Haussmann's creation of the Parisian boulevards, allowing easy access of troops, police, water cannons and paddy wagons. Inside the library half a million books had been removed, ostensibly put in storage somewhere off campus, replaced by lounges for students to sit and lounge on, eating and drinking and gazing at their computers which they could access anywhere, no necessity for the books to have been thrown out other than the agenda of destruction and digitisation.

His first attempts at inquiring into Vicars' career came to nothing. The reference section had been abolished, the books vanished. He checked the on line catalogue. No *Who's Who* anywhere. Not even digital. A triumph of rationalisation. He could feel himself getting into a rage but there was no one to get enraged with. No one at the check-out desk. Just a uniformed security guard at the door. Everything automated. Everything alienated. He keyed Vicars' name into the catalogue. Two books came up. Both edited books. But there he was, Vicars, Timothy, ed. *The Files: How Security Watched Us – Per-*

sonal Accounts and *Triumph of the Internet*. Both were out on loan. Nothing else. He considered putting in a recall notice for both of them but then decided not to. Why declare an interest?

Instead he would phone up Mrs Vicars and ask if she had copies she could lend him. And while she was at it ask her if she had a copy of her husband's CV around anywhere.

Of course she did. Tim always kept a few boxes of unsold copies of his books on hand in case an opportunity to present them to someone arose. Or for bedside reading.

'Kim and I will crawl beneath his bed and steal them for you.'

On the phone he couldn't tell whether her answers carried a note of contempt or mockery in her precise elocution. Perhaps they didn't.

'Kim wants to say hello to you.'

A deep, savage bark blasted in his ear.

'Hello Kim,' he bellowed back.

'Isn't he sweet?' she said. 'He remembers you.'

A succession of sharp barks hurtled down from Queensland and rattled through Plant's skull like a soft nosed bullet.

'Unbelievable,' Plant agreed. 'Can you get him to mail the books to me in Sydney?'

He heard her asking.

Kim barked his assent.

'And I need a copy of your husband's CV, if you have one.'

'I'll send you his Wikipedia entry,' she said.

'Does that have everything?

'Of course. He wrote it himself.'

So presumably it had everything. Except what Vicars chose not to include.

Neither Uncle Toby nor Mrs Vicars had mentioned the book on the files. But Fullalove had it in his library of spookery, intelligence, paranoia and conspiracy theory.

'Ah yeah, thought I remembered the name,' he said, producing a copy.

'But you didn't.'

'It rang a bell.'

'But no one answered.'

'I think you can reach your own conclusions from that.'

'You're too stoned to remember what books you've bought.'

'You can never be too stoned,' Fullalove said. 'As for Vicars' book . . . ' He waved it in the air. 'It was not a memorable contribution to the topic. As you might expect.'

'But you still kept it.'

'You bet. It's all evidence of something. In what it doesn't say, rather than what it does.'

'So it doesn't say much.'

'These books on the files never do.'

'What files?'

'Security files. Special branch. ASIO. FBI.'

'So what did Vicars have to say?'

'Not a lot. The old edited book number. Usual bland introduction. The rest is people banging on about the files kept on them and the infringement of their human rights and civil liberties. Case studies of famous fuck ups. All of which have been done to death in the media over the years. Nothing new being said, naturally.'

'So did Vicars have a file?'

'So he says.'

'Why?'

'Hard to see. He says he was outraged to discover there had been a file on him and this outrage provoked him to do this book.'

'What did the file say?'

'That he was of no further interest, according to him.'

'That must have pissed him off. What a put down.'

'Yeah, well, it's all fiction anyway. Can't believe any of it. The thing with these books about the files is you've got to be in it to write about it. Otherwise how are you going to get any information? Which means, of course, you can't believe the information that's given.'

'Which is why you've got three rooms and the hallway lined with books about spooks and secret agencies.'

'It's all data. Just needs interpreting correctly.'

'But you said you can't believe it.'

'Sure. But it's useful to know what they feel the need to lie about.'

'And Vicars' book?'

'Usual stuff. People banging on about how they were kept under observation. Or writing about other people who were. What it serves to do is provide cover for their informers. Put a chapter in about there being a file on this old geezer or that old female person and how they were victimised when the truth is they were informers all along. And still are.'

'How do you know this?'

'It's bleeding obvious, isn't it? Wouldn't you make sure of that if you were running an agency?'

'And Vicars?'

'He has to be complicit.'

'You don't think he just emailed all these people and said get your files under freedom of information and write about how you feel about them?'

'Not if you're in your right mind. For a start, how would you know

who to write to?'

'Well known lefties.'

'How do you know they're not agents or informers pretending to be lefties? You'd end up dealing with some full on spook pretending to be a dissident and everything you were up to would be monitored and the book would never come out. The only books that come out are the ones put together by trusties.'

'You've evidence for this?'

'Just common sense. Have a look at Vicars' book. All lies and deception.'

'So what's the point?'

'Disinformation. And it gives him a profile. Something to put on his CV. Gets him a shonky university appointment. Gives him the image of a sympathetic shoulder for sad dissidents to cry on and whisper their innermost secrets in his ear and show their manuscripts to. Clean up the universities by identifying and purging dissidents who can't keep their mouth shut. There he is with his edited book affirming civil liberties and human rights. What the universities claim they stand for having abandoned scholarship and knowledge and inquiry and culture and the heritage of the last eight hundred years. And he can feed the info back to ASIO or the SIS or CIA or whoever. All very cosy.'

He handed the book across. Plant flicked through it, took in the introduction, Vicars' only contribution.

'The lazy sod didn't write much.'

'He didn't write anything,' Fullalove said. 'He'd already published the introduction as an essay for some dodgy magazine a couple of years earlier.'

'So he just reprinted it?'

'Recycled it. Sounds better. Environmentally correct.'

'So did he write it himself, or just put his name to it?'

'Well done,' Fullalove applauded. 'At last, you're learning.'

'Do you have an answer?'

'Answers are unimportant. It's the questions that matter.'

Plant flicked through a few more pages while Fullalove held forth.

'It's not what's in the files anyway. Who cares? It's what action they take when they've got the information that matters. And they're not going to put that in writing. Not the sort of things they get up to. Slipping acid in your mineral water so you're off your face at public meetings. Breaking up relationships. Blocking jobs you apply for. Selling you bad dope. Giving you a hot shot. The files are nothing. Every government keeps files on its citizens. So what? And they're full of lies and errors and unsubstantiated rumours. So what? It's what they do that counts. And you won't find anything about that in books like this. You can be sure of that. The only thing you can be sure of.'

'The only thing?'

'Look, people like Vicars bang on about freedom and privacy and the uncensored internet but it's all words. It's irrelevant. It doesn't work like that any more. You can denounce the security services for exceeding their powers. You can say they should have a warrant every time they look at your emails. That it's an infringement of human rights to access records of your web searches. But in the words of the prophet, talk's cheap.'

'What prophet was that?'

'My old man. Always amazing to find out your parents knew a thing or two. Anyway, he knew that. Vicars and co can go on all they like about how there should be freedom and privacy and the rest of it. But that's all irrelevant. The technology for surveillance and hacking and monitoring is all there so it's going to be used. Either by the intelligence agencies and police and tax department, or if they're

put under restrictions, then they'll just contract the surveillance out to the private sector and buy the data on the free market. You can't disinvent the technology. It's there so it's going to be used. End of story.'

'So Vicars is just wasting his time, really.'

'No way. He's positioning himself as a champion of freedom and dissent. So people trust him and tell him stuff. Which he passes on. Why else would he edit a book like that?'

Chapter Seven

There was little to be gained by fronting up to the university and asking to see Tim's room. Absorb the atmosphere and locate clues to his whereabouts. Plant couldn't see them letting him in, and he didn't fancy his chances at a bit of surreptitious lock picking in the corridor. He phoned the switchboard and asked for his old supervisor. There was no listing. Plant suggested trying the department. There was no department of that name.

It had all been long ago. Plant had no particularly fond memories. Nor unhappy ones, for that matter. It just wasn't especially memorable, any more. It hadn't led to anything, no cushioned ease in an ivory tower. He'd arrived too late for that, in the time of retrenchments and fixed term contracts and casualisation. Sometimes he felt he'd arrived too late for everything.

He found Dennis's home number in one of the old phone directories Fullalove had preserved. Dennis, an inveterate luncher, suggested joining him at a vegan restaurant in Newtown. He was waiting there when Plant arrived.

'All alone,' Plant said, Dennis usually to be found with a couple of cronies.

'Time like an ever rolling stream,' Dennis said.

'Yes?'

'Bears all its sons away.'

'Really? Literally? Your old . . .'

'And where are now Jem Roper and Jack Hall?' Dennis intoned. 'Yes, they drop away. Our revels now are ended. Alas, poor Revill.'

Not the best start to a leisurely conversation. And no alcohol. Jasmine tea. No longer the days of the six hour lunches.

'Keeping busy?' Dennis asked.

'Not especially.'

'That's worrying.'

'Not especially,' Plant said. 'Depends on how you look at it. From an overview you might say that crime has ceased, so there is nothing to investigate. That might seem good to some people.'

'That's what it looks like?' Dennis asked. 'Well, you know that that can't be the case.'

'No?'

'No. They've just got things sewn up. All the people with money. Like our vice-chancellor on a million plus a year. They don't need you. While the people without money can't afford to hire you. That's all. Crime prospers.'

'It's as simple as that?'

Dennis beamed.

'Now you know.'

'Thank you.'

'You always were a good student.'

'Was I?'

'Oh yes. You always agreed with what I said. Or said you did.'

'And that's the mark of a good student?'

'It's a start,' Dennis said.

He dug into the green beans with black bean sauce, the tofu, the noodles, a practised hand with the chopsticks.

Various anthropological looking ladies and mature students of Buddhist studies piled their plates from the self-service smorgasbord. Lone young men read books as they ate. A steady stream of pedestrians passed by the windows, the monstrously obese, the desperately undernourished, the poor, the prosperous, the young, the

old, the forgotten.

'So what brings you hot on the trail?' Dennis asked. 'We can be sure it's not a social call, delightful as it is to see you. So presumably you're on a case.'

'Just some background.'

'Of course. Isn't it always?'

'Tim Vicars.'

'Ah, bloody fool. Suspended and hung out to dry and terminated.'

'What did he actually do that was so terrible?'

'I don't think he ever did anything. Just your average airport academic. But he used forbidden words in some private jokey emails between friends. Racist, misogynistic, homophobic, climate change denial, holocaust questioning, anti-bicycling . . . Heaven forbid I should reiterate them.'

'And they suspended him for forbidden words?'

'And thoughts.'

'Forbidden thoughts?'

'Don't even think them,' Dennis warned.

'Isn't that all a bit extreme?'

'Destroying someone's career and removing their livelihood? What, you think the punishment is a bit disproportionate to the offence?'

'Well, yes,' Plant said.

'You think that if it was an offence then they should just have charged him. Taken him to court, and had him pay a fine or do time. Or get off, more likely.'

'Something like that.'

'Yes, well,' Dennis said. 'Such are our times.'

'And this was in his emails? Not in his lectures?'

'Not sure he gave any lectures.'

'Or his books.'

'Not sure he ever wrote that much.'

'But they weren't nailing him for his teaching or publications?'

'No. No one's come up with anything. Just his private correspondence.'

'How did it happen?'

'Someone accessed his emails and published them in one of those on-line gutter press sites. And the university instead of saying we assert the principle of confidentiality of private communications and respect of copyright, tossed him to the wolves. Suspended him for incorrect thoughts and prohibited language.'

'Can they do that?'

'They just did.'

'On what grounds?'

'On the grounds that the university email server is not to be contaminated with prohibited words and impure thoughts.'

'And they can do that?'

'University staff are bound by the terms and conditions of university email use.'

'And what are they?'

'No idea.'

'Is there some agreement you have to sign?' Plant asked.

'Apparently. Not that I can remember.'

'But the university claims so.'

'Oh, they claim so. You get a university email address, you're deemed to have agreed to the conditions of use, whatever they might be.'

'The onus is on you to find out.'

'Apparently. You have to suspect they're up to something devious.'

'Like what?'

'Well, surveillance and entrapment, I would've thought.'

'And they entrapped Vicars.'

'They certainly did. So what's your interest in the poor fellow?

'He's disappeared.'

'Can't say I blame him.'

'You haven't seen him around?'

'Me? I'm no longer in touch. I go to the occasional seminar. Listen to some appalling visiting globe trotter. Unless the prospect looks too ghastly. Which more and more often it does. But that's about it.'

'Did you know him?'

'Saw him around at the odd seminar.'

'What was the reaction of his colleagues to his suspension?'

'What you'd expect.'

'I couldn't hazard a guess.'

'You could,' Dennis assured him. 'His colleagues passed by on the other side and said nothing. The students and media bayed for his blood.'

'So he won't have gone to earth in some kindly colleague's granny flat.'

'Shouldn't think so.'

'So where would he be?'

'How should I know?'

'Where do disgraced academics usually go?'

'To a vice-chancellorship somewhere, I imagine.'

'You think he's looking to move? Applying for jobs?'

'I doubt that anyone would touch him.'

'So where would he be hiding out?'

'Isn't he married? Wife up in Queensland or something?'

'She has no idea where he is.'

'Doesn't necessarily mean anything. Sounds like your typical academic marriage. Best you can hope for. And don't quote me on that. Or on anything for that matter.'

'Wife not knowing where you are?'

'These are the unsayables of our time. Best not to talk about them.'

'What was he like, Vicars?'

'Slippery sort of cove.'

'In what way?'

'Pleasant enough. Tried to be, anyway. Not exactly ingratiating. Would've been if he'd been better at it. But there was always that unconvincing edge. You know, the razor blade inside the doughnut.'

'I've not heard that one.'

'I think I probably just made it up. Maybe not a doughnut. Maybe a bar of soap. Or a mobile phone.'

'But your sense was . . .'

'Something cold and calculating beneath the bonhomie.'

'But there was bonhomie.'

'Gregariousness, anyway. Turned up to everything. My spies tell me he was a regular at staff seminars. Actively contributing to the degradation of what remains of the subject, no doubt.'

'You have spies?'

'We all have spies. Don't tell me you thought it was just a figure of speech. This is the surveillance university. You need to know who's surveilling you.'

'So what else did your spies tell you?'

'Nothing much. Just that he was always around. Not sure why

you'd bother when you're just visiting. Maybe for something to do, like me. Though I don't go to that much any more.'

He picked up a piece of tofu with his chopsticks.

'Too depressing to see what they've done to the place.'

'What was he working on?'

'Never saw much sign that he was.'

'Didn't he have some big research grant?'

'Oh yes. Decriminalising marijuana. Not the sort of topic they'd give you or me funding for.'

'Probably not.'

'Definitely not,' Dennis said. 'They'd be afraid it would all go up in smoke with someone like you. What they used to itemise in grant applications as consumables.'

Plant gave his polite smile, the non-committal one.

'So what's Vicars got that we don't have?'

'Must have backers.'

'Doesn't everyone need them? Referees and so on.'

'A bit more than that. They're not going to fund just anyone for a project like that.'

'So he's got to be a trusty.'

'I'd think so,' Dennis agreed with a studied detachment. He focussed on chasing a few noodles around his plate.

'And now he's used forbidden language and gone AWOL.'

'That's the problem with trusties. You can't trust them.'

'Is that so?'

'Looks like it. But what do they expect? These chaps get a research grant from somewhere or other. Research council, drug companies, drug dealers, who knows, who cares? It's all money and that's all the university administrators care about now. So they've got their

funding and they offer themselves around, I'll bring my filthy funding to you if you make me a distinguished visiting professor. No teaching, of course. That's the other racket. The research grants all provide funds for "teaching relief." I always believed your research fed into your teaching. Not any more. They hire part-timers on the cheap to do their teaching. Then they hire research assistants to do their research.'

'And it works? That's how it's done?'

'Sure does. Sure is. They swan in, visit for a year or so. Get themselves given a room, fly back and forwards interstate, and then they're off. Gone are the days when if you were working on something you just sat down and did it, got up and wrote your thousand words a day, spent the afternoon in the library. You didn't need visiting fellowships and residencies and short term distinguished professorships or vice-chancellors' cronyships. Could never see the justification of it all myself.'

'You get around, I suppose,' Plant speculated. 'Meet people, make contacts.'

'The thing about these characters,' Dennis said, 'is you never know where they're coming from. They never seem to have any actual subject. No base in any discipline. You can never pin them down on what they actually claim to know. I mean, decriminalising marijuana. Is he a medical academic? Policing specialist? Pharmacologist? Social worker? Or is he just a media whore? Find yourself a topic to get yourself on television.'

'Did he say anything about it?'

'He gave a seminar. Another one on the freedom of the internet. I mean, what's the connection? In strictly academic terms I don't see it.'

'So what was he up to?'

Dennis shook his head. Slowly. Reflectively.

'But something.'

'It's hard to tell. He could just be a clever operator. Good at getting funding. Can see the way the wind's blowing so trims his sails. But . . .'

'He could be a clever operator and still be up to something.'

'Indeed. The thing about these chaps is you can never pin them down. There's never any real base to them, no body of knowledge. It's all technique. Theory. Managerialism. The assumption you can manage anything or theorise about anything. Without knowing how it works or what it is.'

'But he wasn't actually managing anything.'

'Intellectual managerialism. Nothing remotely practical. And the thing is,' Dennis continued, 'people like him are the norm now. They're no longer the disreputable fringe. They're no longer the hangers on and the wannabes. They are the university now. No wonder they cleared all the books off campus. They're not needed any more. These characters don't read anything.'

They sipped at their jasmine tea, chased shreds of noodles around their plates with their chopsticks.

'Where did he come from?'

'Here originally. Then he got some peripheral position in the U. K. and climbed his way up.'

'Peripheral position.'

'Oh, one of those research institutes. Not a real job.'

'What's a real job?'

'Teaching twelve or fifteen hours a week.'

'And he didn't do that?'

'No, he got himself some research fellowship. There was a rash of those places.'

'Doing what?'

'Good question.'

'And are you going to answer it?'

'Not sure that I can do. Or care to.'

'Sounds promising.'

'Indeed. Anyway, you had these places popping up all over the U.K. and the U.S.A. People who couldn't get hired for a proper job got short term contracts at them. Like a staging post. They mainly catered for overseas graduate students. So there was a bit of supervising work. The rest of the time the fellows or associates or whatever they called themselves toured Eastern Europe and the Middle East and Asia spreading sweetness and light and recruiting likely graduate students.'

'I think I get the picture.'

'Vicars certainly did. Moved from institute to centre, campus to campus, the classic wandering scholar.'

'How much of a scholar was he?'

'No idea. Never published much that I know of.'

'But always in work.'

'Always on the payroll. Couldn't speak for the work.'

'Successful, then.'

'So he seemed to believe.'

'There were doubts?'

'I can't speak for Vicars.'

'But you had doubts.'

'Don't you generally find that people with real ability are modest? Don't need to assert themselves? But Vicars, he had that air of superiority without any reason that I could see. Except the need to prove that he was successful. Which presumably he wasn't, if he needed to prove it.'

'Still, a stellar career.'

'Maybe,' Dennis said doubtfully. 'If he was so successful, what was he doing here?'

'That's a depressing statement.'

'I am depressed. We used to have a first class institution. Look at it now.'

'Is it that bad?'

'Yes.'

'In what way?'

'Appointing someone like Vicars, for a start.'

'So he wasn't that good.'

'Of course not. He was one of those typical middle-class Australians of that generation who went to England and got into the universities or the media. For ever desperately dropping hints of how they'd really made it. But if you have to tell people you've made it, you haven't, have you? Vicars hadn't. He made that painfully clear every time he tried to show that he had.'

'But he went to America.'

'Part of trying to be a successful academic in England is getting a job in America.'

'And then he came back here.'

'Maybe his contract ran out. Maybe he wasn't that successful in America. Or maybe someone needed him to do a job here. Just because he was a pretentious prat doesn't mean he wasn't here for a purpose. Whatever that might have been.'

'Or might still be.'

'There you are then.' Dennis said. 'You're well out of it, you know. It's all over now. It's worse than you could possibly imagine. We used to have a great scholarly library. Knocked spots off most of the university libraries in Britain or the States. Open access to the stacks.

You could get in there and browse around and discover books you didn't know existed. You can't do that in the Bodleian or the British Library or any of the state libraries here.

'Any scholar can tell you about the importance of serendipity. You walk along the shelves and books leap out at you. Things you'd never heard of, books the mainstream sources never refer to, amateur voices, different voices, dissident voices. Crucial bits of information, esoteric details. Things you'd never heard of or seen a reference to. Stuff that has effectively been suppressed. But that's all ended now. They've shifted anything that hasn't been borrowed in the last five years off campus. And used tax payers' money to pay for some private storage facility out in the sticks. So unless you already know they exist, these are books you will never find, because if you don't know they exist how can you order them from deposit? You've got to know what you want before you look for it. Which isn't my idea of research.

'Removing a book just because it hasn't been borrowed for five years is absurd. Just because books aren't borrowed doesn't mean they shouldn't have been borrowed. Courses are taught badly and the students aren't told to read anything. But what happens in another year when the courses have a better teacher and the students are told to read something and the books are out of print and can't be ordered again?'

'True,' Plant agreed, remembering some of his teachers.

'Why five years? If you're doing any original research, and don't ask if anybody is doing any, but say by some quaint chance you were, you'd be wanting to use material no one had looked at for twenty years, maybe a hundred years. And it's not just this place. All the universities are doing it. World wide they're purging libraries of books not borrowed in the last five years. And if that isn't a conspiracy, what is?'

'Why are they doing it?'

'In our brave new world uncontrolled access to information has

been deemed problematic. The shift of books to deposit libraries is an extension of the surveillance society. Put away anything politically incorrect or reactionary or radical or progressive, depending on the current political agenda, and make it hard to find. Not actually destroyed, just deposited. Basically it has to be all about controlling access. Restricting it and monitoring it. You can't just walk in and look up a book or journal. In the past you could read it there, make your notes, make a photocopy of what you needed, and nobody would ever know. But you can't do that now. They've taken the journals off the shelves claiming they're all archived digitally, which means you have to log in. Same as ordering a book from deposit, you have to log in. Everything you consult will be duly recorded. And may be used in evidence against you. So think about the implications of that. Academic freedom, forget it.'

He took the lid off the teapot and looked inside. It was empty.

'More?'

Plant shook his head.

'Time to go, then.'

Dennis got up from his chair laboriously, letting out an involuntary groan. 'Bad back,' he said.

Where were the long boozy lunches of yesteryear? When noon slipped into afternoon and dissolved into dusk and they still sat there.

'Can't do it any more. Health scares. Dire warnings. Direr examples. Death of old colleagues. Dementia of others. Divorce and consequent desperate poverty. And despair. Coming to terms with defeat. In the end old radicals become quietist. They stop socialising. Stay at home and surrender to the consoling millenarian conviction that change will come, but in its own time.'

'And will it?'Plant asked.

'Oh yes. It has to. If they take away that belief, we shall truly have nothing left.'

Chapter Eight

News from the Dark Side, the internet magazine that ran the Vicars emails, was housed in the latest area of urban renewal. Old factories and warehouses, from the days when products were manufactured locally and the proletariat had gainful employment, now tarted up as post-modern spaces. The redundant workers and their families had been relocated to unemployment on the outer fringes of the city and the warehouses and terraces turned into art galleries and coffee shops and antiques showrooms and IT offices.

Plant pressed a buzzer at the security door and was buzzed in. He squeezed past the padlocked and conspicuously expensive bicycles in the corridor exuding empowerment and rights to be asserted. The walls were covered with graffiti. There was no way uninvited young hoodlums could have gained access at night. These were commissioned art graffiti, laboriously sprayed by art school graduates showing their freedom from tradition and representation and beauty and meaning. From Lascaux to Picasso, aeons of art eliminated with a few quick spurts of a spray can.

He took the lift up a couple of floors. It opened into a reception area. Welcome to the Dark Side. Another buzzer. A door opened at the back and closed too quickly for him to see what went on behind it, how big an operation, how many people involved. Angela Dark stood before him, gestured to a seat at a table. He took it. She sat down across from him.

Dark grey walls and ceiling, black doors and door frames, black slatted plastic window blinds, angled to minimise any intrusion of sunlight. A black, metal framed desk, black computer set up, keyboard, monitor, printer, phone and the rest of it, black boxes, automatically recording anything said in the room for all Plant knew. You had to wonder, though. Plant wondered.

Long gone were the days when the front pages of past papers were framed and displayed on the walls, banner headlines, bold type, historic events. Print and paper belonged back with patriarchy and public ownership. Now the news was there on your phone or whatever other device you preferred at the touch of a finger, more or less. It left the walls awfully bare, except for assorted sticks and twigs of wood scattered around, representing art or installations or still life.

Angela Dark offered a bit more variety of colour, red setting off the prevailing black as befitted a high profile anarchist. Red lips, red finger nails, red scarf, red ear rings, the rest all black. Except for the teeth which were conventionally white. Excessively so, it seemed to Plant, compared with his own.

It had always puzzled Plant how a self-professed libertarian anarchist from an underground paper could have mutated to a regular columnist on a reactionary broadsheet. But now as broadsheets disappeared and redundancy restored her credibility, she had resurfaced as a champion of press freedom and scuttlebutt on a webzine. A tribute to the triumph of the will. You couldn't say it was ink in her veins as she had moved beyond ink. Maybe she had moved beyond the whole cardiovascular system.

She had begun her career using to the full all the naughty words prohibited at her private school. It had gained her notoriety and a recognised by-line. Vicars must have been a godsend to her. A scandal she could exploit to the full. A story she could get paid for. From whoever paid to keep a free internet magazine going. No doubt the same sort of people who had funded the so called alternative aka underground rag on which she had honed her skills decades earlier. The old containment policy. Provide a pseudo-alternative run by government men. And women. Never forget the government women. Was that what she'd been all the time? And still was? Well, she wasn't going to be telling him, so no point in asking. But it all offered a possible angle on Vicar's disappearance, taking it beyond the merely personal.

'Still snooping?' she greeted him cheerily. Or malevolently. Or both.

'Fancy office,' Plant responded. Compliment people on their work environment.

'Thank you,' she said.

The politeness surprised him. He had expected a snarl or an obscenity. He was nearly thrown off balance.

'Who's paying for it all?' he asked, gesturing at the reception area, the walls, the twigs. It was important to bounce back fighting, off balance or not. And it might have elicited an answer.

But it didn't. She just smiled. Those shining white teeth.

'In my job, we ask the questions,' she said.

'Same in my job,' Plant replied, 'but without the royal plural.'

'So what are you here for? You got a story or you got a question?'

'Tim Vicars.'

The red lips widened into a gruesome grin.

'Great story,' she said.

'Even though you wrote it yourself.'

'Give credit where credit's due,' she agreed.

'Did you write it all yourself?'

'I'm capable of that, oddly enough. Even though I have the body of a mere woman.'

'I never doubted it.'

'So don't.'

'You didn't get a little help from some friends?'

She shook her head and looked at him distastefully, lips pursed, tight shut now.

'You've developed hacking skills.'

'If I had I wouldn't be telling you.'

'But you're too vain to admit you don't know how to.'

'I know . . .' she began, and then stopped. She smiled. 'Good one, Plant.'

'So you do know.'

'I neither confirm nor deny,' she said. 'But as far as that waste of space Vicars is concerned, no, I didn't hack into his emails.'

'They just came to you.'

'Yes.'

'Out of the blue. Out of cyberspace.'

'Yes.'

'They were just given to you.'

'Yes.'

'No cash changed hands.'

'Why would it?'

'I forgot, you guys aren't interested in cash, this is a pure, altruistic, public interest operation.'

'Yes,' she smiled.

'And you expect me to believe that?'

'I don't fucking care whether you believe it or not, Plant.'

'Right. That's pretty clear and unambiguous.'

'It is. But you're not.'

'Me? I?'

'You. What are you up to, Plant? What is it you want?'

'I'm making inquiries about Professor Vicars.'

'Yes, I got that.'

'That's all.'

'Why are you "making inquiries"?'

She was good at putting the quote marks into speech.

'Is he dead or something? Dare we hope?'

'Dead?' Plant said. 'Tell me.'

'I don't know. You tell me.'

'Why did you suggest he was dead?'

'I didn't suggest anything. I'm just asking what you're up to.'

'Making inquiries.'

'Why?'

'Client confidentiality.'

'Bullshit.'

'Like the media, I have to protect my sources.'

'Don't give me that, Plant.'

'Why not? You've got enough bullshit already and can't handle any more? Drowning in it, are you?'

'Takes one to know one,' she said.

'They gave you a flat pack of clichés when they set up the office, did they?'

'Fuck you, Plant.'

'That's more like it.'

'Fuck off.'

'The authentic voice of the untrammelled media.'

'I'm serious.'

'You want me to leave?'

'Yes.'

'And you can't tell me anything about Tim Vicars.'

'Nothing more than I've written.'

'Which is?'

'Read it,' she said.

'I did, but I forget it. Not exactly deathless prose.'

'Racist, sexist, misogynistic . . .'

'Yes, I got all that.'

'The man was a fucking hyena. Not even a hyena. A lowena. What more do you need to know?'

'Whatever you can tell me.'

'What is this? He's gone missing or something?'

'Why did you pick on him? Was there something personal?'

'Pick on him? He picked on himself.'

'And he's the only academic to use forbidden words?'

'Almost certainly not,' she said. 'But he's the one we got.'

'Seems a bit unfair.'

'Tough,' she said. 'He's a media junky, he's always sounding off on talk shows, writing opinion pieces, people should know what he's really like.'

'As I understand it, he's in favour of decriminalising marijuana and keeping the internet uncensored.'

'So are most people. That's beside the point.'

'Is it? Sure you're not working for the Say No to Drugs lobby?'

'Of course not. Get real.'

'Even though you don't realise it? That you've been fed his emails in order to discredit his case.'

'People who conceal their racism and misogyny behind progressive causes deserve to be exposed.'

'What about the people who oppose progressive causes. Do they get denounced? Or are they protected?'

'No,' she said. 'You can see my record.'

'Show me.'

'Look it up for yourself. You can see what I've written. Nobody pulls any punches on this paper.'

'Let alone avoids clichés.'

'You some sort of literary critic now, Plant?'

'I endeavour to maintain standards,' he said.

'You're an arsehole, Plant, did you know that?'

'Can you put that in writing?'

'I'll put it in the fucking paper if you want, Plant.'

'Do you still call it a paper? Even though you're saving trees. And burning up fossil fuel in vast amounts to power the computers you're dependent on. Search engines situated in the frozen north of Norway to keep them cool.'

'Oh fuck off, Plant,' she said again. She stood up, interview at an end.

Plant stood up too.

'So let me get this straight, you didn't hack into Vicars' emails, even though you're an old media hack.'

'That's what I said already.'

'His emails just arrived out of the blue.'

'That's what I said.'

'Free, *gratis*, no cash changing hands.'

'That's the way it was.'

'And you've no idea who sent them.'

'Have you?'

'Me? No.'

'Nor me,' she said.

'But you ran them anyway.'

'We did some checking. We established they were authentic. We

did the background on him. And we went for it.'

Plant nodded and turned to leave. He stopped in the doorway. One last question.

'And no one told you to.'

She gave him one of those looks of studied contempt that he was not unfamiliar with.

'Get real, Plant,' she said. 'Would anyone tell you if they had?'

Chapter Nine

Since Vicars had published a couple of books then possibly he had an agent. Almost certainly, if he was as well-connected as his career might suggest. Even if they were only edited books. As long as his name was spelled correctly on the spine, they had everything a book required. Weaponry for academic advancement.

Plant phoned Mrs Vicars.

'Yes,' she said, wary, tentative, cautious. Kim's barking reverberated through the resonating shell of the house. Plant could see it, grey, shrouded in drizzle like half-suppressed tears.

'Plant,' he said.

'I was just about to take Kim on his walk,' she said. 'You only just caught me.'

'Sorry.'

'No, it's no problem. It's a beautiful day here, there's no hurry, we'll go out in a minute, Kim, just sit.'

'One quick question, does your husband have an agent?'

'An agent? What sort of agent?'

'A literary agent. For his books . . .'

'Oh her, that sort. Yes, he does, though I don't think she's much use.'

'What's her name?'

'I can't remember.'

'Uh-huh.' Plant grunted. Now for the lies and evasions. But no, he was wrong.

'He just called her Agent Orange.'

Plant grunted again. Groaned, even. More like the ocean's long

withdrawing roar.

'Are you all right?' Mrs Vicars asked. It sounded like genuine concern. 'I'm sorry, I don't know her real name.'

'I do,' Plant said.

Agent Orange traded as Jacqueline Gold. She was what Plant and others of his generation still referred to as a literary agent, but literary had come to have the wrong associations in the business she was in, so it was a word she scrupulously avoided and never included on her letterhead or in conversational monologue. She was always known as Agent Orange. Not only because of the colour of her hair, gold like her surname. Her name and her hair signalled money, wealth, precious metal, which was the lure she presented to writers and publishers and anyone else who might care to look or inquire. Along with defoliation, death and destruction for anyone who stood in her way. There were various speculations on how she felt about the name and who first coined it. Best analysis concluded she had coined it herself and loved it.

She answered the phone herself. Control freak. Or financial vicissitude.

'I don't meet with authors,' she told Plant as he tried to make an appointment.

'I'm not an author.'

'Or translators.'

'I'm not a translator. Or a publisher,' he added for good measure.

'So why are you wasting my time?'

'You represent an author called Tim Vicars.'

'And all my business is confidential.'

'But do you?'

'I neither confirm nor deny,' she said, like something out of Lang-

ley, Virginia.

'He's gone missing.'

'Who has?'

'Vicars.'

'And who's he?'

'One of your authors, I understand.'

'So why are you calling me?'

'I thought you might know where he is.'

'Why would I?'

'No reason.'

'I don't keep tabs on my authors.'

'So he is one of your authors.'

'I didn't say so.'

'Look,' Plant said, 'can I just drop by? It'll only take five minutes.'

'It's taken that already.'

Plant decided on silence, speech not achieving anything.

'Oh all right, if you must. Just make it quick.'

At least he'd hooked her curiosity. Whether she had anything to divulge, and whether she would divulge it, was another matter. Or matters, for that matter.

Plant had encountered Agent Orange in the past. His impression, confirmed with a few inquiries of other people, was that she was foul mouthed, hated literature and loathed writers. A deep and justified intellectual insecurity made her hostile to any writer of ability. She delighted in degradation, selling trashy romances and crass crime. Not that she was unique in that respect in the book trade. And not that she didn't loathe publishers.

Her agency was in Glebe, up the road from MacArber's book-

shop, a fifteen minute walk from the university. The office was the ground floor of a terrace house. All done up. Renovated. Gentrified. A narrow strip of garden lurked behind a fence of iron spikes. The spikes were painted black, their heads gold. The garden was covered with white and grey stones, little chips of rock and pebbles. Nothing growing. Easy maintenance.

The walls of her office were a vibrating golden glow. So was her hair, like the setting sun seen across the haze of desert sands. She sat at her desk in a dress of the same general colour, on a high-backed, wide, swivelling executive's chair, gleaming orange leather, like a traffic light about to switch to the red. Plant took it as a warning. If in doubt, stop. Don't even proceed with caution. He stopped. The desk was a slightly paler hue, silicone coated pine, but still with that golden tint. He felt like a bee trapped inside some giant golden bloom. Whatever had golden blooms. Or a defoliated citrus orchard. Plant neither knew nor cared. Beyond nature. A fly in amber. A honey trap.

He introduced himself.

'We've met before,' he said, and would have said when and why but she cut him off with supreme indifference, a peremptory 'No doubt.'

Not just lack of interest but a refusal of the possibility of any interest. He wondered if that was just for him, or if she reacted that way to most people. Or knowing what he was there for, was she in defensive mode?

'Tim Vicars was one of your authors,' Plant said. Said rather than asked.

'Was,' she agreed.

'But not now?'

'After that email idiocy? Who would touch him now? Like a truck of rotten fish.'

'Why's that?'

'Because he's been publicly discredited.'

'By Angela Dark?'

'By himself. By his stupid emails.'

'And that's it? It doesn't matter if his books are any good?'

'That's it. Finished.'

'A bit extreme, isn't it?'

She shrugged.

'It's the way it is. No point wasting time arguing the toss. He's blown it.'

'Was he any good? I mean, before this, was he a . . . '

'A tosser?' she cut across. 'He was an author. What do you expect?'

'Have you been his agent for long?'

'Long enough.'

'His book on the files.'

'What about it?'

'Did you handle that?'

'Handle it?' she shuddered. 'What do you take me for? Did I sell it? Yes, I did.'

'Were there any problems?'

'Why would there be?'

'No difficulties, delays, interference?'

'No.'

'No fall out?'

'It was just a book. It wasn't a nuclear bomb.'

'Did it do well? Earn its advance?'

'Ask the publisher.'

'So it didn't.'

'I didn't say that.'

'If it had done well you would have told me. You wouldn't be able to stop yourself.'

She smiled in delight. Laughed. A fearful sight. Lip-sticked lips wide open. Glistening teeth. Plant recalled Little Red Riding Hood and Alfred and 'is 'orses 'ead 'andle and Jonah and the whale.

'All my books do well,' she said, 'never you fear.'

'Excellent,' Plant said, trying to look like he meant it but probably sounding unconvincing. 'Excellent,' he repeated, hoping she would take it at face value and disregard any untoward nuance or hesitation. He envied her certainty. At least he thought he did. Or might.

'What about his new project?' he asked.

'What about it?'

'What was he working on?'

'THC.'

'THC?'

'*The Hashish Collection: The History of Cannabis*.'

'Hasn't that been done before?'

'To death. He was just regurgitating it all. But why not? Memories are short. Especially when they've been fucked by years of cannabis consumption. And it's all in the public domain. Out of copyright. No permissions or rights payments. All the classic texts plus a handful of assorted druggies, wankers and academics banging on about decriminalisation.'

'Is it any good? The book?'

'Still waiting for it.'

'Decriminalisation – is that like the hot topic to sell the book?'

'Could have been.'

'So what line did he take?'

'It was an anthology. He didn't have to take a line. He got other

people to do that.'

'So why was he doing it?'

'Why not? A book is a book is a book.'

'To make money,' Plant suggested.

'Why else?'

'And did he?'

'Did he what?'

'Make money?'

'I haven't sold it yet.'

'And will you?'

She fiddled around with the stuff on her desk.

'Probably not. The sales reps were running scared, saying the shops won't stock it.'

'And won't they?'

'Probably not. Not the big stores. Where the sales are.'

'And that was it?'

'What do you mean?'

'That was his only book? There weren't any other proposals?'

'That was it.'

'It was hardly a major research project.'

'Like you said, cash in on the decriminalisation debate. He figured it was going to be a hot topic.'

'And what did you figure?'

'Don't ask me. I'm not an academic. I'm not an author. I just sell their shit for them.'

'But he could pass it off as part of the debate. Like a serious contribution to . . .'

'To his finances, sure. If that was going to get it some sales, sure,

why not?'

'So who was in it?'

'In what?'

'The cannabis book.'

'You don't think I'm going to tell you that.'

'Why not?'

'How do I know you're not going to steal it? Pitch it as your own idea somewhere?'

'I guess you don't.'

'So don't bother giving me assurances . . . '

'I'm not.'

' . . . because I wouldn't believe them.'

'Of course not.'

'That's settled then,' she said.

'If you can't sell it, I can't see that I'll be able to.'

'I didn't say I can't sell it. It's Vicars I can't sell.'

'I thought . . . '

'You thought wrong, Mr Weed.'

'I thought you said you were having trouble placing it.'

'Like you, Mr Weed, trouble is my business.'

'But you haven't placed it yet.'

'Still trying.'

'Trying hard?'

'I always try hard, what do you think I am?'

'But if it's the same old familiar stuff, is anyone going to want it?'

'The same old familiar stuff is what sells. People feel comfortable with the familiar. They feel safe.'

'So it's better to be safe than original.'

'Take your pick. Whatever works.'

'What makes it work?'

'Sales.'

'Is that all?'

'More sales.'

'So until a book is published and selling, you don't know if it's any good or not.'

'That's the bottom line.'

She reached into her handbag beside her chair. She took out a pack of cigarettes, all health warnings and hideous images of diseased and cancerous tissue. She tapped out a cigarette and then tapped it back in again and put the pack away. The smoke free office. Like prison.

'When did you last see Vicars?'

'No idea.'

'Really?'

'I try not to see my authors more than I have to.'

'Why's that?'

'To preserve my sanity. They're all fucked.'

'All of them?'

'One way or another, yes. Egofuckingmaniacs, toxic narcissists, psychopathic fantasists.'

'Must be hard.'

'Hard isn't half of it.'

'What's the other half?'

'What? Oh, a wit. Mr Smartarse. Listen. I don't have time for jokes. I've got a job to do.'

'Doing what?'

She glared at him, but must have realised he was taunting her.

'Lying on my back getting impaled by fucking publishers.'

She eyed him reflectively.

'If I thought you could cut the mustard I might give you a go,' she said. 'But as it it, you'll just have to take my word for it.'

'Sure,' Plant said. 'I believe you, even if thousands wouldn't.'

'Fuck you.'

'You just said you wouldn't,' he pointed out.

'Listen,' she said, 'what did you say your name was, listen Mr Weed, I've just about had you up to here.'

She drew a line with her hand just above her cleavage. Usually the line was up to the throat, in Plant's observation. He wondered if there might have been a significant suggestiveness about the gesture. Though the gesture may have become so routine that the original signification had faded. Maybe it was just his unreconstructed prurience.

'Who do you think you are, coming in here and grilling me like this?'

'I'm trying to find Professor Vicars,' Plant said.

'And you think I've bumped him off? For making it harder to sell his lousy unsaleable books? I could've. That's for sure. And he's not the only one. But why would I bother? He's not worth the effort. None of them are.'

'Why did you say that I think you killed him?'

'Don't you?'

'What makes you think he's dead?'

'My eternal optimism. Why else would you be looking for him? If he was alive he'd be popping up somewhere. Especially him.'

'Especially him?'

'Especially him. Always asking me to get him on this talk show, get him on this TV panel. "What's in it for me," I'd say, "where's the book, where's the advance, where's the royalties? You wanna go on radio shows that don't pay, you just go on for the honour and fame and glory, do it in your own time, don't ask me to set it all up, I've got bills to pay, I gotta live." Anyway, that's all over now. Nobody's going to touch him. He's as sought after as an arsehole with AIDS. And Ebola virus and Hep-C into the bargain.'

'So he got around.'

'Never missed a trick. Every bloody book launch, every talk in town, there he was, working the room, schmoozing up . . .'

She tailed off.

'Schmoozing up to whom?'

'Whom? Oh, how Chandleresque. I don't know whom. I try to avoid my authors on social occasions. It's like being a doctor, being an agent. People hitting on you for a free consultation every time you go out in public. So you see them at an awards event or a festival opening, you cross to the other side of the room.'

'But you still go out in public.'

'To hit on publishers.'

Plant looked at her quizzically, that artfully dishevelled mop of red hair, glowing like she was Vivaldi or Judas Iscariot.

'So there's a pecking order in this?'

'You bet there is.'

'And writers are at the bottom.'

'Below it.'

'And publishers?'

'We need them.'

'And they need you.'

'You bet. They don't want to have to deal with writers and all the

shit they churn out.'

'So you're like their security detail. The guards to the compound. Protecting the publishers.'

'Screening out the shit.'

Plant nodded.

'Except the profitable sort,' she added. She couldn't resist. It was the image she had carefully cultivated. Foul mouthed, financially grasping, the no illusions agency. Forget art, forget worth, go with the money.

'And you handle that.'

'Up to here,' she said, her hand drawing a line across her forehead. 'And I tell you what, Mr Weed, I love it.'

'Happy as a pig in shit,' Plant spelled out.

'Someone's got to do it,' she said.

Chapter Ten

Since Vicars had edited a couple of books, there was the possibility that sometimes he bought a book or two. It did not necessarily follow. There were many writers and academics who never bought a book. Never read one either. Read it, I haven't even lectured on it. But as MacArber's Rare and Collectible books was just down the road from Agent Orange's agency, Plant called in. It was somewhere Vicars might have gone, only a short walk from the university. Spitting distance as they used to say. In the days of spitting and spittoons.

And a visit to Mac was almost obligatory if you wanted information. Obligatory for Plant, anyway. Almost. Mac had an ear for gossip and an eye for bad behaviour and no doubt other organs for other activities best not spelled out at this point. Or, as far as Plant was concerned, at any point. The investigator who preferred not to know. Some things, anyway. Leave them to the imagination. Alternatively, to delete all messages, press delete. All messages deleted.

Coming in from the bright, sunlit street, MacArber's shop was a twilight zone. Bookshelves lined the walls and reached up close to the ceiling, stacked with stock. The window failed to let in much light, filled as it was with display shelving displaying the more lurid or enticing of Mac's current wares, a selection of erotica and cult classics, substantial biographies of cultural icons associated with some, indeed any, sort of notorious misbehaviour, and the odd volume of quality fiction or small run, small press poetry. Mac kept it constantly changing, to give the impression of rapid turnover and desirable rarities, and to keep himself amused. A shifting collage, a living poem, a time capsule in all its transience. There was another shelf beneath the window, and a couple of tables in the middle of the room. Plant had asked Mac why he didn't put a couple of bookcases in the centre to display more books than the tables allowed.

'Dishonest people would hide behind them and slip books into the inner recesses of their clothing,' Mac said, 'let alone the recesses of their person. Just think of the trouble one could get into forcibly body searching them.'

'You couldn't resist the temptation?'

'I prefer to maintain a clear line of sight.'

Even without additional shelves it still felt crowded. The walls exuded the furry, fibrous, flaking fragments of the bindings of the old books lined up there, like the red flock wall-covering of Indian restaurants of a vanished era.

'Oh, that wicked man who used all those naughty words. There hasn't been that much excitement in Sydney since that mad Irishman shot the Duke of Edinburgh.'

'When was that?' Plant asked, something else he must have missed through not reading the papers regularly.

'13 March 1868. Henry James O'Farrell. Literary sort of name, don't you think? Or Japanese submarines shelling Sydney harbour. But you probably don't remember that, either. 31 May 1942. But they both pale into insignificance compared with the force of offensive language. What a carry on! Gave me an idea, though. A dictionary of all the forbidden words. With regular updates. Revised and expanded editions every year. I think it would be a best-seller, don't you? A Tourette's Thesaurus of the banned and the damned. Compulsive bedtime reading.'

'I'm sure you already have one.'

'I could get you one, for a price.'

'Handwritten?'

'Whatever you prefer.'

'Did Vicars ever come in here?'

'And whisper sweet nothings *sotto voce*?'

Plant waited.

'As a matter of fact, or as a matter of actual fact if you prefer, he did. Which I felt was a bit rich given his public pronouncements on the future of the book.'

'What did he pronounce?'

'That the book is dead.'

'Really?'

'Absolutely not.'

'Which, Mac?'

'The book is alive and flourishing. Vicars lyingly proclaimed otherwise. Not that that stopped him nosing around.'

'What did he buy?'

'On the chase, are we?'

'Just idle curiosity.'

'No it isn't. I can see the way your nostrils flare. Most fetching.'

'What did he buy?'

'Oh, we are focussed today.'

'We are,' Plant confirmed.

'Not much. He was, how shall I put it? Don't want to use one of those words, do I?'

'Don't you?'

'Wouldn't want to be discriminatory.'

'I'm sure you do.'

'I assure you I don't. How shall I describe him? Physiologically, perhaps. Congenitally tight-fisted? Or should I have left the "congenitally" out? Is it offensive? You get the picture, though, I'm sure.'

'He didn't buy anything, then.'

'I don't recall his actually purchasing anything, no. He used to fossick around amongst the bargains.'

'Bargains? What bargains? Not like you, Mac.'

'The bargain table outside on the footpath.'

'All the stock you bought by mistake and can't get rid of.'

'Not by mistake. You get things in job lots. And fashions change. One age's bestsellers become . . . '

He let it tail away.

'Unfashionable,' Plant offered.

MacArber fiddled around with the sound system beneath his counter. He held up a couple of compact discs. Tchaikovsky or Tchaikovsky. Unsaleability was not a topic that engaged him.

'So what unfashionable bargains did he buy?'

'I didn't take a lot of notice.'

'Yes you did. You always do.'

'Do I? Am I so caring a bookseller?'

'What did he buy?'

'As I said, I don't recall his buying anything.'

'How did you know who he was?'

'I'd seen him on some dreadful television programme our national broadcaster transmits. To its everlasting shame. Like most of what it transmits. Holding forth on the death of the book and the triumph of the internet. Then I saw him promenading along the street with that awful agent creature.'

'Not Agent Orange?'

'The very same. She's always mincing past. The two of them were a most distasteful sight. All that billing and cooing. At their age.'

'Really?'

'Would I tell a lie?'

'If there were a few dollars in it.'

'So what is this worth to you?'

'As a lie? Or as the truth?'

'Oh, Plant, how mistrustful you are. You must have had a very unhappy childhood.'

'Are you saying Vicars and Agent Orange were an item?'

'How should I know? What can I say about the antics of apparent heterosexuals of a certain age?'

'But they could have been.'

'Oh, they could have been. Like all the other poor boys she marches past with.'

'Who were they?'

'Probably hired from some agency or other. Escort agency, literary agency, what's the difference? How would I know?'

'Not your cup of tea.'

'I'd have to have a sip first to find out for sure. But on first impressions, no.'

'Is she a customer of yours?'

'Ho ho!' Mac said. Said rather than laughed. 'Alas, no, thankfully, no. Not her, either.'

'Which is it? Alas, because she doesn't bring you any business? Or thankfully, because she terrifies you?'

'True, both. On balance I must say I am quite glad she never comes in. She's not one of the book buying public.'

'Even though she's a literary agent.'

'Well, she doesn't use the L word any more.'

'Of course not,' Plant said. 'Go on.'

'I see her pass by. On the other side, of course. Striding up and down between her office and the university. Sometimes with your

Professor Vicars.'

'And did she peer into the bargain tray with Vicars?'

'Of course. With her horrid beady eyes. Trying to see if any of her precious authors had been relegated to the fifty cent trays.'

'And had they?'

'Generally. Whenever I come across one of them. She has unerring taste for appalling trash.'

'What does she have to do with the university?'

'How should I know? Bonking authors? Turning down manuscripts? Looking for more trash? She's got some nice little operation going there, word has it. Very cosy, whatever it is.'

'Is there much money in academic books?'

'You know as well as I do.'

'So what's she up to?'

'Probably there to get books by academic staff published. They have someone whose job it is to show academics how to apply for grants. On a salary twice what most academics get. So why not hire someone to get stuff published? Raises the academic profile of the place.'

'So she's on staff?'

'I shouldn't think so. The most important thing for the universities is the research grant money they suck in. But getting books published isn't what it's about any more. Most of the research grants never result in anything published. She's probably just on a retainer. Mind you, it's probably the sort of retainer someone like you could live on quite comfortably.'

'You reckon.'

'Your needs are clearly modest. You're not worried about how you look. Not looking at expensive shoes or good shirts. Or even a decent haircut.'

'How do you know she's on a retainer?'

Mac raised his hands, spread his arms wide. It was not a gesture that conveyed any clear meaning to Plant. Other than that Mac didn't know how he knew, or had forgotten, or never knew, just made it up, or anyway wasn't telling, whether he knew for sure or not.

'Nice work,' Plant said, 'if you can get it.'

Mac tapped the keyboard of his computer.

'I have a mint copy in stock. David Lodge. I can let you have it for a good price if you want.'

'Ho ho!' Plant said. 'The days of literary badinage are not over.'

Mac smiled in acknowledgement.

'Has Vicars been past lately?'

'You want to look through my CCTV?'

'You don't have CCTV.'

'Don't be so sure.'

'In your Curiosa and Curiosa room, perhaps.'

Mac smiled and said nothing.

'You've captured his image, have you?'

'Haven't seen him for a while. Not since the story broke. I assume he's gone into hiding.'

'Any idea where?'

'Me? Why would I have any idea?'

'You know so much,' Plant said.

'Indeed I do. Thank you. But I'm not able to help you on this one.'

'See you, then,' Plant said, opening the door, the little bell ringing.

'And you're not even buying a book,' MacArber wailed.

'Hard times.'

'I've got a nice edition right here. Spotless.'

'Good try,' Plant said, waving goodbye.

Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony burst forth. Plant left MacArber luxuriating in the anguish of it.

Chapter Eleven

A copy of *The Triumph of the Internet* arrived in due course. Maybe it had taken Mrs Vicars a while to find it. Maybe there were other things under the bed. Maybe although there was no longer a special printed matter postal rate, books were still picked out and sent more slowly. Maybe . . .

A cursory inspection revealed all. Or enough, as far as Plant was concerned. It was a selection of papers from a conference held some years back at an American university and published by that same university's press. Vicars had edited the proceedings and contributed an introduction with some pious affirmation of a commitment to the unfettered, untrammelled, unregulated, uncensored, libertarian, free-for-all world wide web.

Plant passed it across to Fullalove who was watching a television news programme with increasing irritation.

'A government man,' Fullalove said, flicking through the introduction.

'Why's that?'

'Because that's his line. No censorship of the internet. No restrictions, no controls, no regulation. No restraint on the media. Total free market. The ideology of the chattering classes.'

'Is that so?'

'The reason there won't be any censorship of the internet is because its prime function is surveillance. Surveillance and entrapment. The security services and the police need all the evil shit they can get online, paedophilia and pornography and snuff movies. They need the jihadist sites and neo-Nazi sites and lists of intelligence agents and WikiLeaks and instructions on how to make a bomb. They need all that freely available on the internet so that they can monitor who's

logging onto it. So they can nab them and turn them into informers. Or gaol them. Or eliminate them.'

'Eliminate them?'

'Whatever. What they do isn't the point. The point is they want it all out there uncensored so they can run surveillance. Better than having it go underground. To their way of thinking. So when Vicars bangs on about keeping the internet free from government interference what he's really doing is facilitating the surveillance and entrapment systems of the secret state. He probably bangs on about the importance of government funding for the arts, too, so people think he's a sensitive soul in favour of free expression.'

'And?'

'And what he's actually advocating is greater governmental control of the arts. What they'll let be funded and what will be denied funding.'

'And he knows that?' Plant asked.

'What do you think?'

'So he's not an idealistic libertarian?'

'That old line, you're joking. No, forget that, it's to make himself look good. A concerned defender of civil rights and critic of the government's anti-terrorist legislation. Condemning internet surveillance, which is easy since it's all in place and operational and isn't going to be dismantled or go away. So he attracts dopey dissidents. They come and tell him things and self-incriminate themselves and give leads to other dissidents. He's just a low level informer.'

'You reckon?'

'Of course.'

'Fuck the internet,' Fullalove said. 'I refuse the internet. Why give it oxygen?'

'Well, that's one way of coming to terms with it.'

'I'm not coming to any terms with it. It's the child of evil. Suckled by spooks. All that Bletchley Park stuff we're always being fed. Crosswords and code-breakers. It's got to be bullshit. Why do you think Bletchley Park was kept secret until 1974? To protect the fact that they were developing computers to crack German military codes in the 1940s? Over a quarter of a century after the war ended? No, mate. Forget code-breaking. It was a race to establish the surveillance society. Once they'd developed computers they realised everything could be stored and accessed digitally, a total data retrieval system. So once they'd got email and the internet and e-books up and running, they were on the way to total surveillance. Credit cards, mobile phones, traffic cameras, police records, health records, bank records, library records, everything digitised and effortlessly accessible to the security services for ever after. And people fell for it.

'Amazing how many seemingly smart people don't use a stand alone computer to write sensitive stuff on. To write any stuff. Longhand, mate. The only way to go. Can't be electronically accessed. Can't be read if you develop your own illegible script.'

'That's why your handwriting's so dreadful?'

'Why else?'

'Why don't you write in code?'

'What makes you think I don't?'

'Like Samuel Pepys.'

'Or the Dead Sea scrolls.'

Plant looked at Fullalove in puzzlement. Was it a top of the head remark, a casual analogy, lacking precision? Or had Fullalove finally flipped, delusions of divinity, scriptural pretensions?

But Fullalove came back to earth. Bearing no tablets of stone, but verbal instructions.

'The answer is not to write at all,' he said. 'Remember the Chinese

proverb.'

'Which one?'

'What the mouth emits is wind; the pen leaves traces.'

'Uh-huh.'

'To which, of course, the wise add the Irish proverb.'

'Go on.'

'Whatever you say, say nothing.'

'This is your vision of the way to live now?'

Fullalove nodded, wordlessly.

'But given all that,' Plant said, 'emails recorded, internet usage logged, location traced by phones, traffic cameras, CCTV in shops and streets, public transport usage recorded, credit card purchases recorded, health records . . .'

'And the rest . . .'

'Given all that, how can it all be processed? How many people would have to be employed to monitor all that data and analyse it?'

'Yeah, that old objection,' Fullalove said, dismissing it. 'Irrelevant. It's the Benthamite principle. The panopticon. The prison in which one warder can see into every cell. Like the gaol they built at Port Arthur. Of course he can't see into everyone's cell simultaneously. Or she. So sometimes he or she's not going to be watching you. Most of the time, maybe. But you don't know when they are watching you, do you? The surveillance structure is in place but you never know when it's running live. You're under constant threat. Perpetual fear. That's why they keep having all those leaks. High profile. Year after year. Manning, Assange, Snowden.'

'Why?'

'To remind us that the NSA and CIA and GCHQ and Pine Gap are monitoring all phone and internet traffic. You might think they'd want to keep that secret. But in fact they want us to know.'

'You're saying these leaks were a set up?'

'Who knows? It's like 9/11. If it wasn't all a set up from the beginning, they certainly made full use of the potential, you can bet. Good excuse to invade Iraq. Good opportunity to have all the stuff on the internet and see who looks it up. Keep tabs on potential dissidents. And they want us to be fearful that we're under constant surveillance and we never know when someone's monitoring our emails or our phone calls in real time, or checking back through our credit card purchases, internet searches, library borrowings . . . And that's the point, of course. All this digitised data they can trawl back through if they decide to take an unnatural liking to you. All recorded and easily searched. That's the quantum leap on the panopticon. The possibility of real time total surveillance has now become the very real possibility of unlimited retrospective surveillance. And they need you to know that. They need to frighten people off, otherwise they'd be swamped having to deal with all the people who get themselves entrapped. They need that climate of fear. More effective than repression. Fear keeps people fearful. Paralysed. Repression might provoke resistance.

'So all this nonsense these books go on about,' Fullalove said, picking up Vicars' edited offering and throwing it across the room to land on an empty chair, 'it's all nonsense.'

'A self-fulfilling sentence,' Plant observed.

'It's rabid, liberal idiocy. Demanding a better behaved security service! No email monitoring without a warrant. No water boarding. No torture. Forget it. The technology's there. It can't be uninvented. It's going to be used. All of it.'

'And you're happy with that.'

'No man, of course I'm not. But it's irrelevant whether you're in favour of it or not. It's going to happen whatever you want or protest. Get real.'

'That's your advice. Get real.'

'Of course. Face up to it. Don't pretend it doesn't happen or it can be stopped. Once you accept that that's the way it is, you can work out ways of side stepping it.'

'Like not using the internet, not having a credit card, not driving a car . . .'

'Exactly,' Fullalove agreed. Cheerily. 'You've got it.'

Plant looked at him. This was it. A survivor in the surveillance society. He shook his head, slowly, sadly.

'Books,' Fullalove said. 'They're still the answer. Look at Vicars' insane commitment to digitisation and the destruction of hard copies, his insistence that the book is dead, obsolete technology. And look what happened to him. His emails plastered all over the internet. There's something deeply evil about people like him. Apart from being sad. Anything they say, believe the opposite. That's my advice. Whether he's just a sad case or deeply phoney, it doesn't matter. Whatever he advocates, it's wrong. Morally, practically, every bloody way.'

Avoiding the internet, Fullalove took his news from newspapers. He alternated buying them with buying a coffee and reading the papers in a café for free. A coffee cost a bit more than a newspaper, but not a lot. And most cafés that provided newspapers provided two or three different ones, so if he looked at more than one he was financially ahead. The downside was that sometimes other cheapskates were hogging the available copies. He could wait. End up buying another coffee. Or give up and buy the papers and go back home, this the least economical way of doing it. In Fullalove's situation, whatever that was, but not noticeably prosperous, these were significant considerations.

It would have been cheaper and easier over the years to have had the papers delivered. Sign up for six months and save considerably on the cover price. But such economic incentives had their own

price. Like registering your name and address. And then you were on record, which it was his life's work to refuse. So each day, or at least most days, Fullalove would pick up a newspaper or two on his morning walk for milk and bread and rolling papers. Rye bread preferably, allegedly good for paranoia. For inducing it.

Fullalove the flâneur, strolling the streets of Newtown, amidst the obese and the emaciated, the tattooed and body-pierced, lumbering pedestrians and helmeted cyclists, phones clamped to their ears or held out before them as they walked down the pavements, breathing in the heady brew of exhaust particles and carbon emissions from the vehicle-packed street, nitrogen oxide fumes from diesels, tobacco fumes from the smokers excluded from pubs and restaurants, all part of the urban parade.

His strategy was to use different newsagencies at different times so as to reveal no regular pattern and to avoid being a familiar figure. Inevitably the newsagents came to recognise him. And over the years the newsagencies got fewer as people other than Fullalove stopped buying the papers or bought them at the supermarket. Which Fullalove did too when he occasionally shopped for his meagre requirements. The rest of the time he picked up the news from free to air television which as far as he knew contained no built-in system monitoring his viewing habits. But he mistrusted cable and satellite television as much as he mistrusted the internet.

'What does it matter?' Plant asked. 'What does it matter who knows what you read or watch?'

'No idea,' Fullalove conceded. 'But it's hardly likely to be to my advantage. So . . .'

'So?'

'So it's a matter of principle.'

'What principle's that?

'Fuck 'em.'

'Fair enough,' Plant agreed. 'Though there again, has it ever struck you that your paranoia about web surveillance has totally incapacitated you? You refuse to use it so you end up unable to access information. Knowledge is power. Your paranoia has disempowered you.'

'Sure. Like paranoia disempowered the left. Be safe, suspect everyone. That's how the system destroys collective endeavour. It's a powerful tool. Can't deny it.'

'So you're happy with that?'

'It's not a matter of being happy or being unhappy, it's just a law of nature.'

'But if you start believing that everything's controlled and surveilled, don't you end up with defeatism?'

'Yes.'

'So?'

'So what?'

'So what does that leave?'

'Don't be controlled. No point shutting your eyes to it, but no point being defeated.'

'So what do you do?'

'Work around it.'

'Work around it?'

'You got a better suggestion?'

'Not really.'

'So, be aware.'

Plant's objection to the internet and computer technology was that the system was fraught with time-wasting malfunctions, upgrades that left your printer no longer functioning, no longer compatible, built-in obsolescence of the most blatant and shameless sort, far greater than the automobile industry had ever achieved.

'Oh, that,' Fullalove said dismissively, 'of course. It's just another late capitalist business, why would it be any different from the way the media or the oil companies or the supermarket chains or anybody else do things? It's just business. Of course it's objectively corrupt and a rip off. Why wouldn't it be? It's just institutional practice.'

Apart from its anti-surveillance and monitor-thwarting functions, Fullalove's morning walk for the newspapers also provided exercise. Sound mind in sound body, as he put it, somewhat bizarrely given what the health police would make of the nature of his mind and body.

'You know, sometimes I go for a walk in the old cemetery. I look at all those gravestones and think. You want to come along?'

'Not especially,' Plant said. Strolling around cemeteries was not high on his list of preferred activities.

'Pick up some bread and milk and stuff. We're out of them.'

As far as Plant could see they were out of pretty well everything. He groaned agreement. At least it provided an escape from the cramped chaos of the house, barking his shins on the boxes of books everywhere.

The old cemetery was only a block or so away from the main street. Fullalove provided the guided tour.

'You see, what all these gravestones are saying, or trying to say, is, this life did not pass unrecorded. Here is a gravestone to prove it, complete with inscription. Name, date, occupation even. Now that's very nineteenth century. Trying to dispel the fear that you made no mark. That you failed to be noticed. That your life was unimportant, that you achieved nothing.'

'I guess so.'

'But today it's the reverse situation. Today the problem is avoiding having your life recorded. Every fucking move is monitored. All you

can do is try and do nothing that attracts attention. Say nothing in emails. Keep off antisocial media. Avoid mobile phones. Don't use a credit card. Don't . . . '

'I get it,' Plant said, trying to curtail the over-familiar catalogue.

'Apart from that, it's a nice, quiet spot. So far as one can see remarkably free from CCTV and the rest of it.'

'I imagine so.'

'Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air,' Fullalove intoned. 'That used to be a lament. Now 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.'

Plant stood there like some mute inglorious Milton.

'So fill me in on your inquiries.'

'Is that why we're here?'

'Nice, quiet spot,' Fullalove said again.

'Agent Orange never indicated she was chummy with Vicars.'

'And was she?'

'According to MacArber.'

'Not your most reliable witness.'

'He'd seen them together a few times, he claimed.'

'People are not always forthcoming about their liaisons.'

'If it is a liaison.'

'Could be a motive, though.'

'For what?' Plant asked.

'Disappearing. If you'd had a liaison with Agent Orange.'

'Maybe.'

'He might have wanted to get away from her. Or she might have bumped him off so he couldn't. Or the long-suffering wife might've had enough.'

'We don't know that he's dead.'

'Want to bet on it?' Fullalove offered, taking a long, lingering look at the graveyard.

Chapter Twelve

Plant sat in Fullalove's hovel and brooded. He rolled up a smoke and waited for inspiration. His thoughts inevitably turned to the growing fields of northern New South Wales. High stands of hemp glistening in the noon day sun, exuding a heavy scent of well-being, sticky to the touch, saturated with THC. He could feel it on his finger tips. Tingling. He had just rolled up a number, after all. But it was as if the resinous touch was reactivated, stimulated by his thoughts.

He could keep himself occupied for hours with such thoughts, thoughts that had wafted through the air, or through space, or however and wherever they travelled. There were galaxies of thought out there, according to Fullalove. All you needed to do was make contact with them. Or open yourself up so that they could contact you.

Was Vicars out there too? Turned on, tuned in, dropped out. In the unforgotten though not necessarily immortal words of that earlier Timothy, funded by the U. S. military, Leary. Was that where Vicars was coming from? Some research and development division of some government agency? Such thoughts were not new to Plant. He did not even need the collected paranoia of Fullalove's bookshelves surrounding him to think them. It might be the immediate environment was leaking into his consciousness, of course. But that didn't mean that his perceptions were untrue. If they were perceptions. Or suspicions. Whatever they were.

He rolled up another one and it came to Plant in a flash as they used to say, one quick strike of a match. Where was the likely place for Vicars to have disappeared to? The growing fields of northern New South Wales, where else?

After all, Nimbin was only an hour or so south of the Gold Coast.

Couple of hours max. The whole region easily accessible from that secure base of the gated community. He must have been nosing around. With a project like decriminalising marijuana, he had to have made some contact there.

It was worth a bet.

Plant outlined his conclusions to Fullalove that evening.

'I'll come with you,' Fullalove said, and went off to his room to pack. Plant had been living out of a suitcase and never really unpacked. At first light in the morning they were up and away. Into the Valley of the Weed.

In the years Plant had been driving up and down between Sydney and his five acre lantana farm, the Pacific Highway had been gradually upgraded and diverted. More and more was dual carriageway. Community after community had been bypassed. Karuah, Bulahdelah, Nabiac, Taree, Coongalook, Kew, Kempsey, no longer did the highway struggle through them. Safety and speed had been achieved, the human context reduced, the way people lived no longer observed, quieter for them, worse for cafés and gas stations, safer for children and cats. Plant reflected on it all, engineering, modernisation, technology, safety cameras and speed cameras. Travel had changed. In the past you encountered everything, horses, highwaymen, mud, bushrangers, flooded creeks, fallen trees, innkeepers, hoteliers, talkative folk pumping petrol for you in the days before you pumped it for yourself. He brooded on the paradox of the reduction of privacy through surveillance and the increase of isolation through technology, just sitting in your capsule of steel and glass and plastic, not having to engage with anybody for hours on end, not till you needed more gas, and even then the human contact was minimal, you didn't need to wait for change if you stopped the meter at a round figure, $20, $50, $75, whatever it cost, no messing around with cards, hand over a crisp note, or two, even a crumpled one, and go.

Except this time he had Fullalove sitting beside him holding forth intermittently on random obsessions, tuning into endless repetitive news broadcasts on the hour with local radio in between, country music, more country music and occasional weirdness on community radio. While the safety cameras logged their progress and the speed cameras threatened it, stationery ones, mobile ones in vehicles parked at the side of the road with a necessary warning. They all had notices warning you. Except the Highway patrol cars which suddenly loomed up in your rear view mirror, or lurked menacingly on the roadside or the centre strip, fully equipped with digital recognition technology to read your number plate and check you out and keep a record of it.

'No sat-nav?' Fullalove inquired.

'No.'

'Good. You're learning.'

The message light was blinking on Plant's answer phone when they arrived. It was Mrs Vicars. She had found the outline proposal for her husband's THC book. Should she mail it to Plant and if so where? Or did he have a fax or should she scan it and email it? Or did he want to pick it up?

Why not? Certain sorts of invitations never failed to attract Plant. He knew that. Should he take the bait gracefully? Why not?

'I might go and pick it up tomorrow,' he said. 'Quicker than waiting for the mail.'

'Get her to fax it.'

'The fax doesn't work any more.'

'Email.'

'I never thought I'd hear you suggest that.'

'So go and pick it up, mate. She's hanging out there, waiting for a

friendly visit. Stop slavering and go for it.'

Fullalove chuckled, not exactly malevolently, but close, in a sardonic sort of way.

'A house call. So much more personal, don't you think?'

'As a matter of fact,' Plant said, 'I do. I was thinking of alienation as we drove up. No longer passing through those small towns.'

'I figured you must have been. All that heavy introspection.'

'Everyone's becoming so alienated now, ordering stuff on-line, no human contact at the check out, no jolly badinage with the newsagent or the shop assistant. Just you and a screen. So yes, I do prefer the personal contact to utter alienation.'

'Can't say I disagree. Though I don't think this admirable philosophical decision has much to do with your eagerness to drop in on the fair lady.'

'Dark, actually.'

'No problem. All cats are dark in the night. Go for it, mate. Who knows, you might get lucky.'

'I just need to pick up the book details. Aren't you interested?'

'Not as much as you're interested in seeing your alluring employer. She is your employer, remember. Be subtle. Don't make a false move and get kicked off the case and lose out on all that intimate body contact, let alone the cash.'

'I don't need this.'

'Advice from a concerned friend. I think you do. She's obviously up for it. But move carefully. After all, she might have bumped the old bugger off and now she's sitting there waiting for you. The proverbial black widow. Got a taste for it now. Come into my parlour . . .'

Plant headed up to the Gold Coast the next morning. Fullalove in-

sisted on coming.

'I don't think so,' Plant said. 'I need to talk to her alone.'

'Naturally.'

'And I don't need your offensive ribaldry.'

'Of course not.'

'So . . .'

Fullalove spread his hands wide, that ancient market trader's gesture of bland insincerity.

'No problem. I'm not trying to crack onto her. I'm not going to cramp your style. Just drop me off in Southport. There's a couple of second hand bookshops I need to check out. Pick me up after your sweet nothings. There's bound to be a pub near by. I'll see you there.'

It was not that early a start, for all Fullalove's mockery about the crack of dawn and worms in the bud and the early bird. And after the drive up from Sydney Plant would have much preferred just to have done nothing. But after the drive up from Sydney, or back down, he was still keyed up the following day, so he was generally unable to relax anyway. Particularly with Fullalove around.

He dropped Fullalove off in Southport at the Antique & Collector's Books store and checked in at the gated community's gate house.

'Ah, Mrs Vicars left this package for you. She had to go out. You can turn in the turning circle there.'

And piss off back out. Though that was left unsaid, and may not have been implied. But Plant was ready to supply it, having driven seventy something kilometres and with another seventy something to drive back. And no human contact except for the security guard. Who wasn't the sort of human Plant had been hoping for contact with.

A note attached to the package informed him that Kim had been

taken ill and had to be rushed off to the vet. Poor Kim, tough luck.

He turned in the turning circle and headed back for Fullalove in the pub. He wasn't there. Plant found him still working along the bookstore shelves, a stack of assorted hardbacks and paperbacks beside him, *Utopia, The Rights of Man, Areopagitica, The Hashish Eater* and more.

'A good haul,' Fullalove announced with satisfaction.

Plant headed for a Korean restaurant. He sought consolation in a meatless bib-im-bab and a Hite beer. Fullalove sat immersed in *Sodom, or the Quintessence of Debauchery,* a barbecued beef dish sizzling on the table in front of him. Plant tried to distract himself from the smell of dead flesh by thinking again about Mrs Vicars' plait. He found it disturbing in ways he preferred not to inquire into. Who knew what sophisticated equipment the thought police might have developed? And he wasn't going to go on-line and search out all the connotations of plaited hair. Keep your mind empty of content, wasn't that what the great masters always said, some of them, anyway.

'How was your day?' Fullalove asked.

'She wasn't there. Left a message saying she'd taken the dog to the vet.'

'Could be true. You need to look after guard dogs. No point in having them if they're unfit.'

'Guard dogs?'

'What do you think it is? Don't tell me you haven't thought about it. Even you. You want something warming your crutch, you get a Pekinese or a fox terrier. You got a German Shepherd, it's a different game. They're serious business. Like having a gun licence. Has she got a gun?'

'I've no idea.'

'Maybe you should find out.'

'Why would she have a guard dog?'

'For the same reason she'd have a gun.'

'There's no reason to think she has a gun.'

'She's got a guard dog.'

'Why would it be a guard dog?'

'That's what they are, German Shepherds. That's why people have them. So either she's got anxiety issues, or she thinks her husband's dodgy connections put her at risk, or she's working alongside her husband for those same dodgy people, and she has anxiety issues because she knows she's at risk.'

'What dodgy people?'

'The usual ones, I imagine. CIA. Mossad. ASIO. SIS. They usually work in teams. Husband and wife. They prefer people not to marry out of the service. Of course a lot of the time the marriage is a purely notional one. Like many marriages. If not most.'

He sniffed. The chilli in the kim-chi making his nose run, possibly.

'So don't feel you'd be upsetting her sensibilities if you make a pass. My guess is she'd be expecting it of you. Slavering with impatience. Like the dog.'

'Why does everything you say leave a bad taste in the mouth?'

'You've probably got an upset stomach. Digestion problems. You need to get it fixed, it can be really debilitating. Get some gentian drops. Dandelion coffee. Next time you're in Mullumbimby go to Santos. They've got a herbalist there.'

Fullalove the new age herbalist? It seemed unlikely. But once you remembered the new age herbalists' conspiracy theories about what was being done to them by Big Pharma and the medical profession and the government, it was quite predictable. He thought of asking Fullalove's opinion about them but didn't feel up to a lengthy detailed history and analysis. As far as Plant was concerned, an hour's steady drive down the freeway in the afternoon sun with no words,

no radio, no conversation, nothing but the roar of traffic was the best that life was offering in the immediate future. As good as it gets, pretty well, he figured. He didn't want Fullalove disrupting it. He would rather think about the plait. He found it strangely disturbing. All right, alluring.

Back at his five acres, Plant looked at Vicars' proposal. It was in two parts. Part One was entitled 'The Contemporary Debate', Part Two 'The Historical Context.' Part One was a single page. It listed five topics: Medical, Legal, Criminological, Sociological, Economic. There was no indication of who might write on them. Presumably not Vicars. Maybe that was an unfair presumption. But probably not.

Part Two was a stack of photocopies from various books, some nineteenth century judging by their typeface, some from 1960s paperbacks, small print, pocket book format. Herodotus on the Scythians, putting marijuana on a fire with a blanket held above it, and huddling around and breathing in deeply. Marco Polo on the Old Man of the Mountains and his assassins. Sylvestre de Sacy deriving the meaning of assassin from hashish eater. A couple of stories from *The Thousand and One Nights*. Excerpts from the Indian Hemp Drugs Commission, Simla, 1894. The hashish chapter from *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Théophile Gautier on the hashish club of Paris. A story by Louisa Alcott of *Little Women* fame. Marcus Clarke taking cannabis in 1860s Melbourne. A chapter from FitzHugh Ludlow's *The Hashish Eater*.

'Nothing new here,' Fullalove said.

'I'm sure I used to have an anthology with most of this stuff in. If not two.'

'Yeah, mate, you gave them to me.'

'Gave them to you? I might have lent them to you . . .'

'No worries. I've got them safe.'

'Boxed up and ready for sale, no doubt.'

'You know all this stuff, anyway. You don't need them.'

'I might.'

'No you won't. It's all stuff everybody knows. Must have taken him all of half an hour to collect it. Lazy sod. Still, it pads it out. Saves having to commission new material. And it doesn't cost anything. All out of copyright. No surprises here.'

'If there's money in it, why not? Though Agent Orange reckoned the trade was resistant. Reckoned the shops wouldn't stock it.'

'Probably true,' Fullalove agreed. 'Our squeaky clean society.'

'I don't know . . .'

'I do. This isn't about money, anyway. You can still get this stuff second hand.'

'You speak from experience?'

'Boxes of it. Don't need him pumping it all out again.'

'You've invested heavily in dope book futures?'

Fullalove sniffed. Plant took that as a yes.

'So what is it about if it's not about money? It's hardly a major research project. He could have got all this stuff from a couple of books. Drawn up a contents list in half an hour. Even for these degenerate times that's not much to show for a distinguished visiting professorship. Even for an undistinguished one.'

'Exactly,' Fullalove agreed. He seemed to get a satisfaction from enunciating the word. The precision of it. With the 't' pretty well silent. 'Exac'ly.'

'So?'

'It's not about money. It's not about research. It's a position paper. He's staking out a place for himself in the decriminalisation debate.'

'Why?'

'Good question. Excellent question.'

'Are you going to answer it?'

'He's fitting himself up with some pseudo-credentials so he can claim a seat round the table.'

'What table would that be?'

'Any table. Any platform he can find.'

'So he's a media junky.'

'I think you'll find it's more than that. He's running a line.'

'Well that's all right isn't it? Hands up those in favour of legalisation.'

'It's not quite as simple as that.'

'Nothing ever is according to you.'

'That's true.'

'So what's the catch?'

'The catch. Exac'ly. You think they're going to legalise? Just like that?'

'There's a big move for medical marijuana.'

'And who's going to be controlling that?'

'I don't know.'

'How about the pharmaceutical companies?'

'I guess so.'

'And recreational marijuana?'

'You tell me.'

'How about the tobacco companies?'

'Yeah, probably. So?'

'So?' Fullalove said. 'What do you mean, "so"? This is going to be like tobacco. Or alcohol. This isn't legalisation. This is monopo-

ly control and regulation. The lobby for decriminalising isn't about growing your own half dozen plants in the back yard. That'll still be illegal. It's all about profit for the monopolies and government revenue raising through excise tax. The tobacco companies are desperate. All the anti-smoking lobbies. They need a new product. Marijuana's their last hope of staying in business. Think of all the investors. Think of the potential profit.'

Plant thought of it. Not that he needed to. Fullalove spelled it out.

'Why would anyone do a project on decriminalising marijuana? The real drug issues are ice and opiates and cocaine and their derivatives. That's where the social, health and crime issues are. Vicars wasn't concerned about drug issues. This is about paving the way for government, Big Pharma and the tobacco companies to make money by monopoly control.'

'So you're saying Vicars was in effect a lobbyist for Big Pharma and the tobacco companies.'

'I think you'll find it more sinister than that.'

'Of course,' Plant sighed. 'How naive of me. Go on.'

If it wasn't more sinister than your average sane conspiracy theorist might have thought, then it wasn't going to have held Fullalove's interest.

'What effect do you think his pissy little anthology would have?'

Plant couldn't imagine any effect. Bedside reading for the converted. A couple of paragraphs a night before nodding off. If pain persists consult your doctor. 'I don't know,' he said. 'What's it for then if it's not going to make money or have any effect on public opinion? You tell me.'

'Part of his legend.'

'You're saying he had mythical status?'

'He probably didn't even compile it himself. Just cut and pasted from a couple of sixties books by some intern and given to him with

his visiting professorship to give him credibility.'

'Credibility?'

'As a user. So all the dope freaks think he's one of them. That way he gets to suss out the other interested parties. The freaks, the primary producers, the crims, everybody else who's involved in the trade. There'll be other players besides Big Pharma and tobacco. The profits have had to have been laundered through front businesses for years. Those guys will be wanting to take over the decriminalised trade through their cover businesses. Some of them are public names anyway. Media, rag-trade, pubs and clubs.'

'Then he isn't really upsetting the current operators since they'll get the decriminalised trade . . .'

'They'll try to. But there's going to be a lot of competition. It's a massive money spinner. Addiction. Dependency. The ultimate capitalist product. There's going to be a lot of people jostling for a slice of the cake. Politicians taking up shares in companies positioning themselves. And there's always the chance of a wild card. Which is why they need people like Vicars in there. Collecting info. It's like an opinion poll. Gathering data on the various pressure groups and factions. Just in case. There are so many interests involved. And once you've registered that you'd have to think, have all the bases been covered? Or is something unexpected going to come out of the woodwork and fuck it all up? Just when they think they've got it all so profitably sewn up. So they've got to have someone in there to report back. What do the Muslims say, what's this about them being anti-drugs? What does the arts community feel? Yes, they might think they know, they might think they're all stoned all the time, all under control, but what if some of them had kids who died from some fucking heroin overdose, and now they're all against any drugs? Very vocal. That could create problems. What's the answer? Send in dickheads like Vicars around the universities and the writers' festivals and the morning shows and flush out the

opposition, take the temperature.'

'I guess it's possible,' Plant agreed. Tentatively. 'But I can't see it. Who would have put him up to it? Who cares?'

'A lot of people care. If the trade's legalised, a lot of people could lose a lot of money. It's a goldmine as long as it's prohibited. Those people aren't going to be happy. And they're powerful people. They've bought protection at the highest level, otherwise they wouldn't be in business, obviously. Highest level means cops and politicians. Customs, military, the lot. They're being paid off. If dope's legalised, all that money's going to dry up. Not just the crims are going to be pissed off. So are the police and the politicians. Won't be able to pay off their mortgages. So all that's got to be taken into account, how far they're going to go, decriminalising and regulating medical marijuana but keeping recreational use illegal so there's still a shitload of money to be made.'

'And you're saying Vicars is in the middle of all this?'

'Must be. Listening. Reporting back. Who's getting antsy. Who's planning what.'

'And now he's gone missing.'

'So you tell me.'

'Not sure I like the sound of that.'

'I imagine Uncle Toby felt the same way. I imagine that's why he decided it was time to pass the parcel across.'

'The old bastard.'

'That's him,' Fullalove agreed.

You don't have to like whoever calls you up about a job, Plant told himself yet once more. Had he liked any of his clients? Not unreservedly. Some less than others. It was like working in the media. Did you have to like the media magnate who paid you? Could you? But where else were you going to get work? Anyway, it wasn't Uncle Toby he was working for. It was Mrs Vicars, wasn't it?

'So what you're saying is, it's not a libertarian campaign Vicars is involved with.'

Fullalove shrugged.

'Most libertarian campaigns turn out to be for free market capitalism. It's just the ideology of privatisation and deregulation. Social Darwinism. Nature red in tooth and claw. Survival of the fittest. Rabid greed.'

'And that's where Vicars is at?'

'Where did you expect him to be? Look at his career path. Look at his friends.'

'I'm not sure he has either any more.'

'Uncle Toby. Why do you think he's involved?'

Plant said nothing. He should have known. Indeed at one level he did. Anything involving Uncle Toby, however peripherally, was going to be dodgy. That's how he'd got caught up in it. Inveigled by the lure of the secret state.

'Mind you,' Plant suggested, 'if the trade did end up controlled by Big Pharma or the tobacco companies, you might get some quality control. Dope that's free of rat turds and dog hairs.'

'I'd rather smoke dog shit than the chemical additives and preservatives they put in tobacco.'

'I suppose there is that.'

'You bet. And think about it, if they can impose forcible fluoridisation of the water supply, imagine what they could put into dope.'

'I guess whatever they wanted, pretty much.'

'You've said it. They'll fill it with additives and shit. Shelf life warnings. Best before. Expiry dates. Then they'll dump all the out of date stock in Africa or somewhere like they dump out of date pharmaceuticals and end up killing millions.'

'I can't see that out of date marijuana would kill anyone.'

'It's the chemical additives.'

'What additives?'

'The one's they add in. Preservatives. Colouring. Taste enhancers, things to get you hooked.'

'Dope gets you hooked anyway.'

'Sure. But they'll add in all the shit they add to chocolate and biscuits and ice-cream.'

'You know this for a fact?'

'I know this for a fact, that if they exist, they'll be used.'

It wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility. Most things Fullalove came up with weren't. Not that that made them any the more palatable. Plant chose to let it pass. He dragged the conversation back to the immediate issue.

'So you reckon he was some sort of government man.'

'Some agency or other. Who cares what they call it? They'd probably be lying anyway. All you need to know is he was a government man.'

'Whose government?'

'Any government.'

'That's really helpful.'

'You want me to conceal the unpalatable truth?'

'Too late now.'

'Exac'ly. They're all the same. There's no "whose" about it. Governments don't represent anyone except themselves. And each other.'

'Just one single, world conspiracy,' Plant said.

'Something like that,' Fullalove agreed. 'When are you going to learn, there's only one side?'

'So he's in there as some sort of spook and at the same time assembling this anthology promoting dope. Isn't there a contradic-

tion there?'

'Are you serious? Drugs have always been the basic business of spooks. Narcotizing young dissidents. Getting people to talk. And making money. Cash crops. So they can fund their covert projects without going to government for approval. The spook agencies are into promoting dope. Why do you think the media keep banging on about it? Advertorial. Let people know it's available out there. Doesn't matter if they show people being busted. All those customs and highway patrol programmes on television. They speak with forked tongue. You might imagine they're meant to warn people off. Frighten them. Frightening people is what the government wants: flu epidemics, terrorist bullshit, global warming. They get you so frightened you give up politics and protest and turn to drugs. Life, be out of it. Like I said, it's advertorial. Lets you know the drugs are available. Just go out there and score.

'In fact,' Fullalove added, 'we're going to need to do that pretty soon, the way you're burning through it.'

The suggestion hung there, like subtitles on television that had locked onto the screen and wouldn't go away.

Chapter Thirteen

Dennis phoned.

'I thought I'd best use the old landline rather than the university email.'

'Is that safer?' Plant asked.

'Who knows? It's safer for my back, I can tell you that.'

'You're covering your back?'

'Saving it. Sitting at the keyboard all those years has done terrible things to it. Crippling. I try and keep off the computer as much as I can. Another good reason for not using email.'

'I thought you were retired anyway.'

'They still let you use the university email server.'

'Kind of them.'

'I doubt it.'

'So why do they let you keep on using it?'

'Keep their tabs on us, I imagine.'

'You think the emails are all monitored and hacked into?'

'They're certainly monitored. Whether they're hacked into, I don't know. That's what I'm phoning you about. According to my spies, Vicars' emails weren't hacked into.'

'So how did *News From the Dark Side* get hold of them?'

'They must have been given them.'

'Who by?'

'By whom? My bet is the university. If they weren't hacked into, somebody handed them over. So the university, presumably. Who else would be in a position to hand them over? Either someone in

their IT outfit or someone their IT people had passed them on to. Clearly the IT outfit must run a programme that monitors all staff emails. Easy enough. Key words get flagged, and wham bam.'

'Interesting,' Plant said.

'Isn't it? I imagine they started by flagging political stuff, purge out the unreconstructed lefties, then they got into the war on terror, everybody in Middle Eastern Studies. Then they added sexism, misogyny, homophobia, paedophilia, racism, and the rest. Easy enough. Easier than steaming open envelopes.'

'But why would they have handed over his emails? Why not just call him in and caution him? Tell him to mind his language. Send him for some reconstruction therapy.'

'Because they didn't want him reconstructed. Because they needed him as a convenient scapegoat, I imagine. Heading off potential trouble. Storm clouds on the horizon. They've been sacking staff, cutting over a hundred courses, raising student fees. Natives were getting restless, if I dare use an N word. Even if no one cared about destroying the library, they cared about losing jobs or paying higher fees. Trouble was looming. Think of it. Student protests. Sit ins. Occupations. Riots. The jolly old sixties and seventies. Those were the days.'

He stopped to give a racking cough. Never inhale.

'So to stave off all that they looked for some convenient scapegoat. Someone they could throw to the wolf pack and look good about it. Preferably a dying, white male. Preferably someone in the Arts so they can keep on discrediting the Arts and finally abolish them. Vocational wealth-creation courses the only ones they want now.

'The idea is to head off future trouble by telling the revolting students, "We're on your side. All of us here in senior management, including the VC's personal kitchen staff, are anti-misogynist, anti-racist activists, look at us, how tough we can get on the wicked,

so love us for our elevated values. And stop going on about how the VC's annual bonus would have paid the annual salaries of all the poor sods and sodesses combined who've just been sacked." Made redundant. Terminated their contracts with extreme prejudice. They don't call it sacking any more. Another word you can't use.'

'Interesting,' Plant said. 'Could be.'

'Could be? Of course it could be. It's blindingly obvious. And it serves to keep staff intimidated. You might have noticed the groundswell of support Vicars got from his colleagues.'

'No, I didn't.'

'Precisely, because there isn't any, never was. They're too intimidated. Terrified they'll be the next to go. And the student activists are all ecstatic. All over the internet. Anti-misogyny wins. Down with racism. Down with Islamophobia. And the fact that we're massacring Muslims on a daily basis in Afghanistan and Iraq and Syria and Yemen can be conveniently ignored. Saves having to protest and take time off the job you need to have to pay your fees. Neat, huh?'

Chapter Fourteen

An early morning dog walker found Vicars' body on a beach a score or so kilometres south of the Queensland border. He was lying in the long grass of the sand dunes. He could have lain there a while without being noticed but the dog sniffed him out. If the dog had been on its leash as council regulations required the body might not have been found at all. Or not found until a flurry of crows and eagles and other carrion feeders had drawn attention to it. Between the ocean and the coast road was a strip of bushland with tracks leading to the beach. The car was parked there, out of sight of the road.

It was Uncle Toby who broke the news. It was not information to be conveyed by a phone call. Though that was not something Uncle Toby said in as many words. As few words as possible was Uncle Toby's general principle for phone conversations.

Once again Plant was summoned. For what purpose was left unspoken. He accepted that as the order of things. It saved having Uncle Toby visit, nosing around Plant's territory, looking over his bookshelves, peering at his seedlings. Uncle Toby offered to meet half way, which was a significant concession. And could only mean that he did not want Plant to be seen visiting his apartment, or anywhere near it. Which said something about whatever he was going to impart and what sort of issues might be involved. Uncle Toby was clearly worried. Equally clearly he was not going to be telling Plant why. Was Vicars some sort of protégé whom Uncle Toby had led into whatever murky world it was that he had access to? Was it guilt that was motivating him? Remorse? Or was it just that having reached what used to be retirement age he was eager to return to operational status? Assuming he had ever left it. And assuming retirement was something still available.

They met at Point Danger, high above the mouth of the Tweed

river, beside the Captain Cook memorial and lighthouse. They strolled along the Centaur Remembrance walk at the cliff edge, beside the memorials to sunken ships, wrecked, torpedoed, their crews lost. Uncle Toby was in Panama hat, short-sleeved check shirt, Bombay bloomers and long socks and sandals. Like a time traveller from the nineteen-fifties or the last days of the British Raj. A rare species though not unique amongst the denizens of Point Danger that morning. He scanned the tourists and dog walkers and joggers with a calm, steely gaze. Nobody seemed to be trying to get too close or loiter within earshot or point a directional microphone at them. The surfers were well out to sea. In their black wet suits they looked like an invading team of special services assassins.

'So what happened?' Plant asked. 'Somebody killed him or did he kill himself?'

'No signs of attack,' Uncle Toby said. 'No bruises or stab wounds or evidence of gunshot.'

'Suicide note?' Plant asked.

'Nothing found so far, I understand.'

'Still time to cook one up.'

'Not everyone leaves a suicide note.'

'Not if it isn't suicide,' Plant agreed. 'Though occasionally someone else fakes one to make it look like it was.'

'No doubt.'

'Anything else?'

'Toxicology reports still to come.'

'So natural causes, accident, murder or suicide.'

'That certainly covers all the bases.'

'I guess it does,' Plant agreed again.

'Without making anything clearer.'

'Sorry about that.'

'Perhaps if we knew where he had been staying it would become clearer.'

'Perhaps. No one I've spoken to had any idea. Maybe the police can do better.'

'They may not feel that further inquiries are necessary.'

'But you do.'

'I have every confidence in the police.'

Plant laughed.

'I do,' Uncle Toby said.

'I don't. And I don't imagine you'd be talking to me here if you did.'

'It's not a matter of confidence.'

'So what is it?'

'I trust your intuitions. You see things other people might miss.'

'Thank you,' Plant said. Without much enthusiasm. Flattery from Uncle Toby was not something he found reassuring. He waited. Uncle Toby waited.

'I don't know,' Plant said. 'Surely there'll be a full investigation. I'm not going to be able to get access to the forensics and phone records and the rest of it.'

'I wouldn't expect you to, dear boy. All that will be more than adequately covered, I'm sure.'

'I see.'

Uncle Toby waited a while. 'I'm not sure that you do,' he said.

'More than adequately?'

'Ah, you do see.'

'You don't trust it. The investigation.'

'Oh no. No, of course I trust it. It will be exhaustive. Comprehen-

sive. Indeed, there will no doubt be so much information that it will be overwhelming. Whereas you . . .'

'With no information . . .'

'Precisely. You can just talk to people. Informally. Get a sense of things. Gossip. All the everyday material out of which someone like you, or like your friend Fullalove, can retrieve the crucial detail.'

'Why not hire Fullalove?'

'He does not advertise his services.'

'I can ask him.'

'No, no, no need. I'm happy with you. And no doubt despite your protestations of confidentiality you will share your findings with Fullalove and receive the benefit of his analysis.'

'When did I sign a confidentiality agreement?'

'Don't worry about it,' Uncle Toby assured him. 'Fullalove's not a worry.'

Which was the sort of statement, together with all its ramifications and implications, that Plant found very worrying.

'You want me to keep nosing around?' Plant said, finally, since Uncle Toby was never going to spell it out.

Uncle Toby nodded in silent agreement.

Nothing said, nothing written down, nothing recorded.

'I still get paid? Mrs Vicars up for it?'

Another nod.

'Nice doing business with you,' Plant offered.

Uncle Toby beamed. He declined the offer of a coffee in Coolangatta. Plant did not insist. If Uncle Toby chose not to be seen with him, that was fine by Plant. If it was as sensitive as Uncle Toby's evasion tactics seemed to suggest, Plant was more than happy not to be seen keeping him company. He took himself off to a French café that made authentic croissants and served organic coffee that didn't

scour your larynx and eardrums, and sat there and thought about things. Like whether sensitive could be a synonym for dangerous. And dangerous a synonym for murder.

Chapter Fifteen

From the account Uncle Toby gave, Vicars' death could have been natural causes or accident or suicide. Would the email fiasco really have drive Vicars to suicide? It might. It might have meant he was unemployable for the rest of his life. Suspended and in due course dismissed, would any university anywhere dare employ him again? Feminist outrage would erupt at any suggestion of hiring him. The gay lobby would crucify him and any university administrator who dared to appoint him. So, suspended, banned from campus, devoid of future prospects, probably about to lose any publishing contracts, suicide might have seemed the only option.

It was not impossible. But for someone like Vicars, a career of fellowships and grants and travel scholarships and such like, surely there were always possibilities. Once a hustler always a hustler. Or had those days passed, and Vicars with them? Who better to ask than Mrs Vicars? Once more to the security compound.

'Please, call me Kate.'

'Kate,' he said.

'Yes?'

Good one, Plant, so eager to get the more personal, intimate note to preface the news that her old man had died. How are you going to phrase that?

She helped him out, did it for him. She had already been told.

'The email business,' Plant said. 'How did it affect him?'

He wanted to ask, would it have made him suicide, but he stopped himself. It wasn't something that could be asked gently. He didn't want her bursting into tears. It was the fear of that that held him

back as much as any delicacy and tact. He could do delicacy and tact, but he found tears hard to handle.

She gave him a long, still look.

'Was he upset? Worried?' he tried tentatively.

'Humiliated? Shamed? Utterly discredited?' she said.

These were questions, Plant realised, not answers.

'Like any normal, self-respecting person? Regretful? Apologetic? Conciliatory?'

Plant said nothing.

'What a joke,' she said. 'He just laughed.'

'Why was that?'

She gave him the long cold stare again.

'Stark insensibility,' she said.

'How did you feel?'

'What I felt is neither here nor there.'

That wasn't true, of course. But it didn't seem the time to push things. Not in that direction.

'So he didn't seem upset.'

'He couldn't see that it was serious. Though that's not quite true. He took it seriously enough to talk about getting a lawyer onto it. Sue for defamation. Invasion of privacy.'

'And did he? Sue?'

'Not that I know of,' she said. 'He doesn't have a lawyer, anyway.'

'You didn't discuss it?'

'Not really. He talked about doing it. Whether he got around to it is something else again.'

'But he wasn't depressed?'

'Not at first. He changed his mind later.'

'No longer amused.'

'Deeply depressed for a while. Once it sunk in what had happened.'

'Depressed enough to kill himself?'

'I don't know. Maybe, yes. More angry than depressed. Pissed off. But at the same time I think he was quite relieved in a way. He was sick of the university. Sick of students and marking and teaching and staff meetings. That's why he went for these research projects. But he was getting sick of them, too. He wanted out.'

Well, he achieved that, Plant nearly said, but stopped himself in time.

'He thought he might get a compensation pay out for wrongful dismissal.'

'Was that likely?'

'No. Not really. He thought about it. But in the end if looked like it was too risky. You can't fight institutions like that. They've got bottomless pockets for lawyers. They'd have bankrupted him. He realised that.'

'Did that depress him?'

'You think it might have filled him with joy?'

'So he was resigned to going?'

'Hardly. He was putting a brave face on it. Talked about getting a new life.'

She did the bursting into tears number.

'A new life,' she said. Hollowly. Dramatically. The sort of over the top reaction Plant could have done without and had been hoping to avoid.

'Did your husband have any enemies, Mrs Vicars?'

'Kate,' she said. 'Call me Kate.'

'Did he? Kate?'

'What?'

'Have any enemies?'

Once again she just looked at Plant, immobile, a few seconds or so, and then dissolved into tears yet once more.

Kim barked, woof, woof, woof, looking up at her. She bent down and buried her face in his fur. And carried on crying.

'I don't know, I don't know,' she wailed. 'I don't know what he was up to.'

'He was up to something?'

'I don't know.'

'But you thought he might be.'

'He was just, oh, I don't know, I don't know, he always seemed like he was up to something and I never knew whether he was or wasn't. It was his manner, you know, like he wanted to make himself seem more interesting, but it put people off. But perhaps that was what he wanted, to put people off, to keep them at a distance. How would I know? I was only married to him.'

'But you don't know of any reason anyone might have wanted to do him harm?'

'To kill him, you mean?' she said. 'No, I don't know.'

'I want to see where it happened,' she said.

'The, er . . .'

'Where he was found.'

That was easier. Where it happened, depending on how it had happened, may not have been were he was found. To know where it happened would be close to knowing how it happened, whether

it was accidental or deliberate or contrived. But so far nothing had been said or released.

'It's down the coast.'

'I know,' she said.

She did her dewy-eyed number. Kim looked up enticingly, resting his chin on his fore paws.

'Could you take me there?'

'Of course,' said Plant the chivalrous.

The road ran parallel to the line of the ocean from Pottsville to Wooyung. Between the road and the sea the strip of bushland was wide enough and wooded enough to block any but the most occasional view of the sea. Tracks opened into it where cars could be parked and people walk to the beach. But where Vicars might have parked and which track he might have followed it was impossible to tell. There was no indication. Not even the remains of a crime scene police tape. The car had been taken away, the scene scoured, presumably. Plant pulled off the road at the southernmost end where the four wheel drives accessed the beach.

'Why would he have come here?' she said.

'Deserted. No houses. Out of sight of the road behind the scrub. Too many backpackers tripping on the beaches at Byron.'

She stood gazing at the spot where the car might have been, holding back from following the narrow sandy path to the beach.

'What sort of dog was it?'

'What dog?'

'The one that found him.'

Plant had no idea. He would never have thought to have asked.

'Wouldn't it have been awful if it had been Kim?'

The beach stretched out north and south, gently curved round in a huge bay. It was one of Plant's preferred beaches for a morning walk, away from the hordes. There was hardly anyone to be seen, a couple of people walking along the firm sand, a four wheel drive with fishing rods on the roof, running parallel to the breaking surf. It was not one of those iconic beaches promoted by the tourist board, with panoramic surveillance, everything monitored and recorded on screen in a life-savers' tower or a Maritime Rescue watchtower with volunteers on duty for swimmers drowning or ships in distress and radio contact with whoever they contacted. For safety. Sharks and wrecks and stuff. All surveilled, whatever the story.

Here was raw nature. Not a life-saver or a tower or a camera or a remote control drone in sight. As far as he could see or sense. Unless they weren't fishing rods but aerials on the four wheel drive.

With no crime scene tape there was nothing to indicate where amidst the dunes Vicars' body had lain. Had he died there, or been dumped there already dead? Had he taken himself there, or been delivered and deposited?

They walked along the hard sand at the edge of the dunes for a while. And then suddenly she slipped off her shoes and headed barefooted across the beach to the edge of the surf. Plant held back from following, didn't salt corrode the stitching in shoes, could he afford a new pair right now, he stood on one leg, hopping like an unhappy heron, taking off one shoe, one sock, switching legs, swaying uncertainly, taking off the second shoe, second sock, walking tentatively, stopping again, rolling up the bottoms of his trousers as the poet had contemplated. He made his inelegant progress across the sand, shoes held in one hand, socks tucked into the shoes. It always looked better in the movies, where they could budget for a new pair of shoes, whether it was a matter of ruining them in salt water or abandoning them at the edge of the sand.

'He was always coming down here,' she said.

'What, here? This beach?'

'Not the beach. Byron, Nimbin, you know. He said it was for his book. He claimed he was looking for people to write for it. He'd got academics and legal people and medical people, or he knew who he could get, but he wanted to get, you know, more sort of . . . '

'Hands on people.'

'Yes.'

'Horny-handed sons of toil.'

'Daughters, more like,' she muttered.

'Ah,' Plant said.

'Didn't you know?' she asked. 'He thought I didn't. It was so obvious.'

'You're saying . . . '

'I'm saying he'd say he was researching his book and then come down here and screw some . . . '

'Ah,' Plant said again.

'I wish you wouldn't say that.'

'Ah?'

'There you go again.'

'I'm sorry.'

'You sound like some inquisitor or something.'

'I guess that's what I am.'

She looked at him and then suddenly burst into a smile.

'I suppose you are.'

She looked alive and alert and alluring. Plant experienced all the familiar feelings. Familiar enough to Vicars, too, apparently. The burden of masculinity, Plant reflected. At the whim of the forces of nature.

'What are you thinking?' she asked.

He kept it to himself. Over the years he had slowly and painfully learned.

'I was thinking,' he said, and he was capable of thinking more than one thing at a time, or maybe thinking one thing and experiencing more viscerally other sensations, more reverie than analytical thought, 'I was thinking,' he said, 'that he could've got himself into more than one . . .'

'More than one what? Floozy?'

'No, no, no,' he said, but it was a possibility after all, though not the issue he had in mind. 'He could've got himself into trouble with the book. I mean he's discussing decriminalisation, but it hasn't happened yet. It's a sensitive topic. Someone might have thought he was working for the drug squad or something.'

'Or someone might have thought he was bonking their bird.'

It was not quite how he would've put it, not right then, but clear enough. There was more than one area of Vicars' life that might have got him killed. If he had been killed. Maybe more than one area that might've driven him to suicide. If it had been suicide.

'You think it mightn't have been an accident?' she said. 'Or a heart attack?'

'I don't know.'

'But you think it's possible.'

'I'm keeping an open mind, I really don't know.'

A sea eagle circled around above them. Grey and white plumage. Like Vicars' preferred colour schemes. It suddenly plunged down to the waves and flew up again with a fish caught in its claws. Kate clutched at Plant's arm.

'I'm glad I didn't bring Kim,' she said. 'He might have got snatched. I worried about leaving him behind. But it was the right decision.'

He could have assured her that even sea eagles would be struggling to snatch a German Shepherd. But it wasn't the occasion to get pedantic about such things.

'Let's go back,' she said.

They drove up north, onto the freeway, back to Kim in the empty house.

'So,' Plant said, 'that's it, I suppose.'

'That's it?'

He didn't know how to put it delicately. 'Now your husband's been found dead you won't be needing me.' It sounded a bit brusque. 'Here's my final account, by the way.' It sounded worse.

'Maybe . . .' she began.

'Maybe?'

'Maybe you could, I don't know, ask around, people who knew him,' she said. 'Just to know that it must have been . . . that he wasn't talking about suicide . . . that it was some sort of accident or something . . .'

Or murder. Which both of them held off from saying.

He could have said he was sure the police would be investigating every angle, except that he wasn't sure that they would. Go to so much trouble. Accidental overdose. Heart failure. Would they want to complicate it by looking for signs of suicide? When there wasn't a note? Would they look at it as murder?

It was good to be kept on the case. Good for cash flow. Keeping busy. But murder? Was that what he wanted? A murder investigation? What gasping chasms might open up at that possibility? And what grounds did he have for considering it? Just a word floating past. Just a possibility to complete a list of possibilities. Or was something somewhere suggesting it, tugging at his attention, refus-

ing to dissolve and drift away?

'Why don't you stay and have something to eat?' she asked.

'I'll be fine.'

'But I won't be.'

She did the quivery dewy eyed number, the bereaved, the shattered.

'I don't want to be alone,' she said. 'It was going to that place. I . . .'

Then the burst into tears bit.

'I'll be all right in a while. But if you could just stay for . . .'

'Of course.'

'I've got to eat, so . . . I can't get motivated . . . not on my own . . . but if you're here . . .'

'We could get take away. Or go out.'

'No,' she said, 'no, I don't want to see anyone. It's better if I get back into cooking.'

She was standing at the kitchen bench, putting out cooking stuff, chopping board, dangerous looking knives, onions, tomatoes, egg plant. Plant stood there as she began chopping, sniffing, her eyes streaming.

'It's the onions,' she said. 'I'm not really crying. Really.'

Should he walk over to her and do the comforting routine, arm round shoulder, soothing noises?

'Sit down,' she said. 'Put on the television. Or some music, why don't you?'

'I'm fine,' he said.

'So am I, really,' she said, wiping the back of her hand across her nose as she sniffed some more.

'Of course I knew what he was up to,' she said.

'In his work?'

'Work?' she said. 'What work? As far as I could see it was just an excuse to find people to fuck.'

'So his books . . .'

' . . . were just an excuse to bonk everyone from every fatuous research assistant to his evil agent.'

It had been worth staying for dinner for that. Apart from the ratatouille itself. He was surprised, agreeably, that she had whipped it up so effortlessly while at the same time sniffing back tears. It was good. Excellent. He remembered to make a point of telling her so. But what was really good was the confirmation that Vicars was having an affair with Agent Orange. Or if not an affair, at least casual sex. MacArber's observations had been true.

'Of course I knew he was fucking her. A woman always knows.'

Plant must have looked alarmed or anxious or something.

'That worry you, Plant? Didn't you realise that? We have e.s.p. You can't get away with anything.'

She sounded totally convincing.

'So yes, of course I knew. He'd been bonking her for months.'

'How many months?'

'Are you some kind of voyeur, or something? Or not even a voyeur. An auditor. You just like to hear about it. At second hand. From the woman betrayed. Does that give you some special kind of sexual frisson? Little shivers in the groin?'

'I hadn't thought of it like that.'

'Well, now that you have, what have you got to say about it?'

Her tears seemed to have given way to something else, a mocking lilt to her voice, the hint of a smile at her lips, something more malevolent than mere amusement.

'Could be,' he conceded.

'You take your pleasures where you find then, is that it? Weird and squalid as they may be.'

She said it in such a way that it could have been interpreted as an invitation. Except for the squalid bit, perhaps. Plant laughed nervously. Of the available options, that seemed best. Nervousness. Rather than responding too readily to what might not be an invitation after all.

'Oh, men,' she said. 'You're all the same.'

Silence was the only response to that. Denial out of the question. Agreement seriously risky.

She topped up Plant's glass of wine, topped up her own, reached her glass across and clinked it against Plant's.

'To men,' she said. 'May their dreams come true. With a vengeance.'

'What I don't understand,' Plant said, 'is why your husband sent those emails.'

'It was a private exchange. He was just wittering on to one of his stupid friends.'

'But was he like that?'

'Like what?'

'Sexist, racist . . . '

'Not especially.'

'I'm not sure what that means,' Plant said.

'Oh, just par for the course. Less so than most of the people he worked with, I'd think. But you know, when people say you're not allowed to say certain things, it just provokes people into saying them.'

'Didn't he know that he was asking for trouble?'

She just looked at him.

'You're saying he did know.'

She turned away and bent over to pat Kim, usefully on hand.

'I didn't say anything.'

'But you've thought about it.'

'Not much.'

He doubted that. He was beginning to doubt a lot of things.

'Do you think on one level he was deliberately inviting trouble? Like he wanted to get suspended.'

There was a long silence before she replied.

'I think he wanted out,' she said at last. 'I think he'd got himself into something and he wanted out. It wasn't just the university.'

'Did he say what?'

'How could he?'

'But he indicated there was something.'

'I felt so.'

'And you figured out what it was?'

'No. I left it alone.'

He doubted that. But the rest of it made sense. The government job, the security angle, pretty certainly. Though if Vicars had those sort of connections, surely he would have been cluey about using the university email server, campuses his area of operations. He would have known the university emails were routinely monitored, even if none of the rest of the staff knew. He would've known he'd be getting his forbidden words flagged. He would have been briefed on that, surely, as a precaution. Maybe not. Maybe it was all need to know. And they didn't think he needed to know. But he must have guessed. Subconsciously was he trying to get himself sacked? Or even consciously. Get himself discredited so no university would ever employ him again. Which would mean he couldn't carry on doing whatever he was doing, and didn't want to continue doing. Maybe.

'Why didn't he just resign?'

'I don't think he could. I think it was easier just to kill himself,' she said.

It made some sort of sense. Vicars had got himself into something and found he couldn't get out. There was always one more thing. He was probably not a career officer with a pension plan and a retirement age. He was just someone being run. Not very dignified when you came to think of it. Just an informer, however much you might try to dress it up in fancier terms. And because it was a basically discreditable role, it was something that could always be held over him. Until he did something even more discreditable so that what they held over him paled into insignificance. So that he became useless to them. And he was free. Discredited, but he was always going to be discredited one way or another. But off the hook.

And then dead.

He couldn't pin her down to anything more specific. The lack of detail was frustrating. Was she being evasive? Or did she genuinely not know? Or was she fantasizing the whole business? From grief? Or to direct Plant's inquiries? And maybe deflect suspicion? After all, never forget, the widow was always the usual prime suspect. Even in Fullalove's conspiracy laden world of the secret state, *cherchez la femme* took operational precedence. Or so Fullalove claimed.

Chapter Sixteen

Plant's attempts at ordered housekeeping were being subverted by Fullalove's book buying programme. Along the walls of the living room Fullalove had stacked his purchases. He had been scouring the charity shops in Murwillumbah and Mullumbimby and Brunswick Heads and Byron Bay, collecting whatever he judged to be potentially subversive. Anything that might make a profit in a climate of repression. Which was quite a lot.

Plant looked at it all in despair.

'Can't you keep them in your room? Do they have to be all over the floor?'

Fullalove sat sprawled on a chair, sucking up coffee, and spewing out smoke. He hadn't been able to find his usual rye bread so was chewing on pumpernickel to keep up the paranoia level.

'You never know with this political stuff if it's been sprayed with some psychoactive substance they use to narcotise dissidents. I don't want to be sleeping with all that stuff, breathing it in all night. Fucks your head up.'

'You let me sleep with it at your place.'

'Yes, well, sorry about that. Running out of space there, that's the trouble.'

'So stack this lot up and put it out on the verandah or something. Pick up some cardboard boxes at the supermarket.'

'They'll get ruined if it rains.'

'Buy a tarpaulin.'

'No way. The rats will get under it and chew the pages.'

'I don't have rats.'

'Everyone has rats.'

'Then get some of those plastic containers with a lid.'

'It's all a cash outlay.'

'So outlay it.'

'I'll think about it.'

'Don't think about it, just do it.'

It was all getting too horribly like Fullalove's hovel. How unlike the pristine cleanliness of Mrs Vicars' living room, antiseptic, sterile maybe, but there was a lot to be said for that.

'Yeah, yeah, sure,' Fullalove agreed.

In the meantime there were more inviting things to do. Like check out Vicars' profile with the universal conspiracy theory.

'Take a look at his career. Some provincial English university. Reasonably obscure. Gets attached to a research institute. Ends up effectively running it, two i/c to some idle professor. A great way of putting people in your debt, invite them to seminars and fellowships at the institute, and if you chose the right ones, they reciprocate. So there you are, off to the States, keep the U. K. contacts, and you're global.'

'A good way to wriggle out of teaching,' Plant said.

'A good way to set up contacts. So to most people Vicars looks like some successful, moderately venal, ambitious careerist.'

'Fair enough.'

'That's the surface interpretation. But those institutes and seminars and conferences and visiting fellowships are basically a way of moving assets around the world. Most academics can't see beyond individual envy and resentment. They assume he's running a nice racket for himself. They know he's got no scholarly worth or credibility. But they think that about all their colleagues. Personal envy and embitterment prevent them from seeing it's a political scam,

part of the repressive apparatus of the state. Cover for government men. Penetration agents. Control and surveillance. Both internal and overseas.

'So we can assume Vicars was pretty twisted. Living a lie all those years. It's not simple careerism. It's some deep psychological disturbance, a primal betrayal, no doubt rooted in the family, Oedipal, sibling rivalry, friendly scoutmaster. I mean, he wasn't unwitting. You don't spend your life in dodgy institutes doing dodgy projects without knowing what it's all about.

'He came out of the late seventies. He saw the left had the best songs but the right had the most money and security. In the short term the future was going to be with the right. So he worked out if he could get the right to fund him to live the life of the left, he'd be in clover.'

'The right?'

'The establishment. The government. The agencies. And by agreeing to infiltrate and inform on the left, the progressive, the alternative, the bohemian, whatever manifestation the times threw up, he would get to live the life. With the best songs. Political demonstrations great for getting a fuck. Lots of travel. And money from the right to fund it all.

'But a decision like this involves a radical contradiction. A deep disjunction. You can live with it for a while. But how long before the tensions of the contradictions become unbearable? Or is it actually quite easy? Isn't it just the default stance of the bourgeois intellectual? The state funded writer? The research academic? Paid by the repressive state, but expressing squeaky clean allegedly progressive views on everything from global warming to same sex marriage. And avoiding anything that might lead to changing the economic order. Inevitably at the expense of considerable self hate, disgust at the roles being played. Or so you would hope. Or was it all a hoot like going black-face or dressing up in drag and hamming up a role and

everyone so fucking stupid they fall for it?

'So out of the repressed self-hate, or from arrogant contempt for the so easily fooled world, something snaps, or slips, and there, in some stoned or drunken late night email exchange with some crony equally needing to release the pressure by expressing the inexpressible and flouting a few taboos, the forbidden phrases, the wicked words, the unacceptable thoughts are keyed in and digitised and transmitted and monitored and recorded and preserved for ever. Or for as long as the technology manages not to fail and isn't hacked into and obliterated by some cyber war of the future.

'So taking the grieving widow seriously for a moment . . .'

'I believe her,' Plant said.

'Of course you do. There, there. That's not the issue.'

'So what is?'

'Yes, he might have wanted out. But maybe he'd left it too late. Maybe it was taken out of his hands.'

'Go on.'

'He'd snapped. And his controllers realised. So, more likely than suicide . . .'

'They terminated him?'

'You said it. And far too loudly.'

Plant took it as a joke. Or as metaphorical. Nevertheless, he got up and moved out to the verandah and then further out again onto the mown lawn.

'Had he taken off his glasses?' Fullalove asked, following him

'I don't know. I don't know whether he wore glasses. Why?'

'Suicides allegedly always remove their glasses before jumping. That's why they claim V. Gordon Childe suicided in the Blue Mountains and wasn't pushed over the edge by one of the security services, as being a good Marxist you might have if not expected at

least suspected.'

'Vicars didn't jump off a cliff, he was found on the beach.'

'Sorry, mate, it was you and Uncle Toby on the cliff edge, wasn't it. At Point Danger. Ominously named. A risky place to meet someone like Uncle Toby.'

'Vicars wasn't a Marxist.'

'Doesn't mean he wasn't killed by the security services. And just because Gordon Childe had taken his glasses off, doesn't mean he wasn't pushed. Of course you'd take someone's glasses off and leave them in full view if you were going to kill someone and make it look like a suicide.'

'As for Vicars,' Plant said, getting back to the immediate issue, 'I don't think he wore glasses.'

'Suicide note?'

'No. Not that Uncle Toby mentioned.'

'It would probably have been a fake, anyway.'

Chapter Seventeen

According to the local press Angela Dark was in town. Display advertisements in the *Byron Shire Echo* and the *Byron Shire News*. Angela Dark in conversation with celebrity agent Jacqueline Gold about *News from the Dark Side.*

'Isn't that a bit contradictory? Why do you have to hold forth in the flesh when you're publishing on-line? Isn't the whole point of the internet to dispense with the flesh? To transcend physical contiguity?'

'You reckon?' Fullalove said.

'Isn't it?'

'You know it isn't. It's all about Look-at-me. In cyberspace or in your face, it's all the same to people like Angela Dark and Agent Orange. If indeed they can be called people.'

'What would you call them?'

'Instruments of oppression,' Fullalove called them.

'Interesting they're both up here, isn't it?'

'You think they're revisiting the scene of the crime.'

'Makes you wonder. A strange coincidence, at least.'

'And we don't do coincidences,' Fullalove agreed.

Plant wasn't sure about the 'we'. Not sure he was happy with it. A royal plural, maybe, could be an acceptable sign of delusion. But he didn't think it was that. It was more like a statement of shared inquiry. Plant wasn't convinced he needed that. Occasional consultation, yes.

'You reckon we should check them out? Buy them a gelato each and find out what they've been up to?'

'And how do we do that?' Plant asked.

'We go to their song and dance act.'

'Spare us.'

It was just an unthought idiom. But it shared that plural of Fullalove's.

'You'll enjoy it.'

Plant knew that was unlikely. As did Fullalove.

'What amazes me,' Plant said, 'is the way people like Angela Dark manage effortlessly to transplant themselves from the alternative underground press across to right wing reactionary mainstream publications and then back again to the new independent internet media. How does it happen?'

'She may not transplant herself,' Fullalove said. 'There may be a gardener who digs her up and re-pots her and transplants her.'

'Same difference.'

'Not really. Not if you start speculating on who's the gardener. And you need to define alternative and independent more carefully.'

'How would you define them?'

'Allegedly alternative. Purportedly independent.'

'So?'

'Says it all, doesn't it?'

'Does it?'

'They're all the same,' Fullalove said, wearily. 'You know that. There's no difference between old media and new media. Print media and electronic media. It's all lies. Just different packaging. But all part of a seamless web of disinformation and dissimulation. Same as political parties. They're all the same. Same backers. Same funding. It's called democracy. Free press. Free market. Soft fascism, they used

to call it.'

'Who used to?'

'People who could see it.'

Plant grunted. There were times when it was too hard to interrogate Fullalove. Best to let it all roll over you like the crashing surf. Keep your eyes and mouth shut and let it pass.

'How does she do it?'

'Do what?'

'Move around like that. Keep surviving.'

'I told you, it's the same job.'

'Wasn't she sacked last time?'

'Just a cover story, probably.'

'Why?'

'To confuse people like you,' Fullalove said. Ungraciously.

'I guess so,' Plant said. Wearily. It was catching, Fullalove's weariness, the burdened shoulders of non-invigorating knowledge. And probably true.

Angela Dark's mission was to expose sexism and misogyny and homophobia and racism and all other forms of oppression. She announced it to the assembled fans. They already knew it, that was why they were there. But they applauded, nonetheless.

'Not end it, notice,' Fullalove pointed out, *sotto voce* but not *sotto voce* enough. It provoked filthy looks from the surrounding fans. Plant shrunk inside himself, hoping for invisibility. 'You need to keep it going in order to keep on exposing it.'

Her whole life had been a mission. Saving trees. Confronting media monopolies. Creating diversity.

Agent Orange signalled approval with half a dozen resounding

claps. Beyond words, as befitted a post-literary agent.

The wine flowed. If not freely, at least impressively. This was not part of the marijuana decriminalisation lobby. No t-shirts emblazoned with dope leaves. Not a whiff of the weed. Or tobacco. A strictly non-smoking environment. Passive-smoking free. Keep cool and end global warming.

'We shall continue to expose paedophilia and bring the churches to their knees. We shall continue to expose sexism and elitism in the universities until their culture is changed. We shall not cease . . .'

It was like a fundamentalist church in the American south or a National Socialist rally in 1930s Germany. Neither of which Plant had experienced but he'd read about them in the safety of an arm chair in the old print culture. Now for the replicated simulacra.

They seemed comfortable together, Angela and Agent Orange, fighting the good fight, swigging back the red, Agent Orange not evidencing any hostility or resentment at Angela's hounding of Tim Vicars. He hadn't been a big earner, pretty certainly, but he was still one of Agent Orange's authors. She might have been expected to exude a little chill at having one of her chosen discredited and destroyed. No sign of it, though. All very chummy.

And then a voice of reckoning, a trumpet call to judgement.

'How do you feel about hounding people to death?'

A strong voice, a warning voice.

'Do you acknowledge any responsibility for driving Professor Vicars to suicide?'

It was Bess, standing at the back of the gathering, in a tight white t-shirt with JUSTICE printed on it in large black capital letters.

'For the third time, Angela Dark, do you admit your guilt?'

And now there was a marked chill, a hushed silence, and then a susurrus of murmurings and questionings, a simmering spreading around the room, steadily becoming vocalised. Bess powered

on above the interjections and shuffling of chairs as people turned around to see who was speaking.

'You drove that man to his death with your criminal hacking of his private correspondence.'

'I do not hack. I never hacked. *News from the Dark Side* does not hack. I was given those emails.'

'Who gave them to you?'

'I cannot say. The transaction was anonymous.'

'Bullshit it was.'

'You can believe what you like.'

'And it won't be anything you say.'

'We were doing a public duty in exposing sexism and racism in the university.'

'Bullshit you were.'

It was not a favourable audience for Bess's intervention. As Fullalove put it, there was no way you could come out and defend what Vicars had written, all you could defend was his right to write and think anything among consenting adults. But that right was not deemed much of a right at all by the audience. This audience basically felt that Vicars had got what he deserved. And they weren't likely to be troubled by whether it was suicide or accident or murder, just as long as it had happened. Victory to the cause.

'Your problem,' Bess told Angela, 'is you claim to be a writer, a journalist, but you are functionally illiterate.'

Gasps.

'You're devoid of any skill with words, you have no sense of the richness and subtlety of language, you know nothing about allusion and innuendo and irony and ambiguity, you have no sense of humour, no sense of the life of language, or parody or wit or . . .'

The gasps were pumped up to howls of outrage, shouts of sit

down and shut up.

'You have no respect for privacy or decency . . .'

'Good old Bess,' Plant's neighbour said. 'She's on form tonight. One of her best.'

'She does this often?' Plant asked.

'Oh, she always goes on like that.'

'Always?'

'Always.'

'Here?'

'Where else?'

'She lives here?'

Plant's neighbour looked at him suspiciously. A potential stalker detected.

'No idea.'

'But she's a regular at these events.'

'Couldn't say.'

She froze Plant out. But it didn't matter. What mattered was that he'd assumed Bess was living in Sydney, occupying Vicars' apartment. Now it appeared she was living up at Byron, or at least was regularly to be seen here. Heard here. So was that just careless work on his part, unjustified assumptions, inadequate questioning? Or had she deliberately misled him? And if so, why? And did that relate to Vicars' being found dead up here?

'Great performance,' Fullalove said. 'Nubile little number, isn't she? All a bit technical, though,' he added, taking on the role of a commentator summarising a political debate. Not that there had been much more of a debate than in most pieces of political theatre, Bess haranguing from the back, Angela and Agent Orange drowned out by the noise of their supporters shouting down Bess.

'All that stuff about language. Not the right audience.'

The audience carried on its shouting.

'Traitor. Shame. Sit down. Shut up. Abolish patriarchy. End sexist language. Castrate the brutes.'

'Kill, kill, kill,' Fullalove offered. 'Who needs irony or allusion or innuendo? The sword is mightier than the pen.'

'In the short term,' Plant demurred.

'In the long term,' Fullalove said, 'we're all dead.'

'Maynard Keynes.'

'What?'

'I was taught always to attribute quotations.'

'Is that so?'

'Scholarly practice.'

'Well, fancy that.'

Agent Orange took command. She beamed round the room like a conductor at the climax of some grand chorus.

'Quiet,' she bellowed.

The room fell quiet.

'Good one,' Fullalove said, once again all too audibly. He smiled affably at the near by hissers and shushers.

'I'll take the next question,' Agent Orange said.

'I haven't had an answer to the previous one,' Bess said, standing firm.

Agent Orange disregarded her.

'Next question, please.'

'So fuck you,' Bess said, pushing her way out amongst the chairs and legs and knees and bags and walking sticks.

Plant was on his feet.

'What's up, man?' Fullalove asked.

'Follow her,' Plant said, pushing his way out.

'Who is she?' Fullalove asked, catching up with Plant at the doorway. Bess was stomping down the street, a power walk of undispersed rage.

'Vicars' girlfriend.'

'Not the wife?'

'No.'

'The wife doesn't feel that strongly?'

'No reason to assume that.'

'Except that she's not here and the girlfriend is.'

'Kate doesn't live here.'

'And the girlfriend does?'

'I don't know.'

'Is this the one you said was living in Vicars' flat in Sydney?'

'Yes.'

'So why's she up here?'

'That's what we're going to find out.'

'Ah, a spot of detection.'

They followed her along the streets named after the poets, down some, past others. Not mean streets, these, even if most of the poets had had their hard times. Lawson in gaol for non-payment of maintenance, Kendall in the asylum for forging a cheque, Gordon suicided, unable to pay the printer for his last book of poems, Marlowe murdered, Jonson killing someone else, Dryden in his coffin, stolen on the way to his funeral. The literary life.

Maybe two people following as they narrated the lives, and deaths, of the poets was less alarming than a single stalker. Maybe Bess was too enraged for mere fear to affect her. She strode down the streets, never faltering, never looking behind, swept through a gateway, up

to a front door, opened it, entered, closed it.

'What now?' Fullalove asked.

Plant wrote down the number of the house and the name of the street in his notebook. How to live with potential short term memory impairment. Be prepared.

'Strike while the iron's hot?'

'I'm not sure it is hot.'

'So?'

'And I think it's a bit late for a social call.'

'It's not that late. And it's not a social call, is it?'

'I want it to look like one, though. I'll leave it till tomorrow.'

'And that will look more social? "I happened to be stalking you last night and found out where you were living . . . "'

'Something like that,' Plant agreed.

'Not a nice intimate nightcap and a little chat?'

'It wouldn't be that intimate with you there as well.'

'It might be,' Fullalove said. 'Who knows her tastes?'

But Plant had turned round and was heading back for the car. A brisk walk. Treat it as the exercise you otherwise fail to do, he told himself. When Fullalove complained that they should have followed in the car so that they needn't have had to walk back, he told him the same. Fullalove gave a grunt which turned into a wheeze, lungs still coated with the fine particles of inner city traffic emissions.

Chapter Eighteen

Plant called round in the morning. Around nine thirty. Not too early, not planning on waking her and dragging her out of bed. Hopefully not too late, and missing her when she'd gone for her coffee and croissants or whatever she might have gone for, assuming she did.

'You again,' she said.

She was in t-shirt and pyjama bottoms.

He tried his non-intimidating smile.

'What are you doing up here?' she asked.

'What are you doing up here?' he asked. Never be the first to give an answer.

'I live here.'

'Very nice.'

'And you?'

'I live here too.'

'You don't.'

'I do.'

'Well . . .'

'Fancy that, as they say,' Plant said, in accord with what was said. 'Holiday rental?'

'No.'

'Family home?'

'No.'

'Tell me.'

'Tell you what? It's none of your business.'

He sighed. 'We need to have a talk.'

'Really?'

'I think so.'

'I'm not sure that I do.'

But she didn't shut the door in his face. He quite expected it. He had experienced it before. More than once.

'Oh, come in then,' she said, 'just let me get some clothes on.'

'No need.'

'You're happy to sit on the doorstep?'

'I meant no need to put any clothes on for me.'

'You prefer I took them off?'

'Absolutely,' he said, ever quick with the unthought response, out of touch with contemporary values.

She gave him a stony look. He tried to stumble out an apology, a correction, a quick cut and paste. She shook her head, the more in sadness than in anger shake.

'In your dreams,' she said, leaving him to follow her down the hallway. He followed. Squeezed past the bicycle, helmet hanging from its handlebars, barked his shin on the pedal despite all his care. She gestured to the open door to the kitchen, and turned and shut the bedroom door firmly behind her. She left him stewing in his own juices. No need to specify their nature or source.

She reappeared in Byron Bay retro casual. A sarong loosely wrapped round her waist, a shirt barely buttoned and giving the illusion of the diaphanous. Plant reflected that he probably had had dreams peopled with scantily clad female persons like that. He found it inevitably disturbing, not sure whether it was really as see-through as it seemed, unable to give the fixed stare to be sure, and fleeting glances not adequate for precise observation. Anguished and ambiguous, like most of the dreams he remembered.

Had it all been truly retro he would have known it was all about

enticement. Transparency appropriated for a different signification in those days. Now he suspected it was deliberately taunting, inciting unseemly looking so that swift retribution could be administered.

'Nice place,' he said, belatedly shifting any approbation from her person to the setting, though still aiming for the complimentary and acceptable.

'Yes.'

'You share it?' he asked, recalling something about her flatmate's boy friend cracking onto her.

'No.'

'Oh. I thought you said you did.'

'No.'

'All on your own?'

'Yes.'

'Pricey?'

'I'm house sitting.'

It saved him from having to do a mental inventory of the place and then attempt to interpret her character from the decor. He was not that good on decor. It was a 1920s or 1930s house, single storey, renovated kitchen, shiny, stainless steel, fridge and oven and so on. Not the sort of things Plant had much knowledge or awareness of. Or interest in.

'But not sharing.'

'The deal is looking after the house and cat, not filling it with sub-rentals. They don't want the place trashed.'

'Fair enough. But you have people to stay?'

'What do you mean? Angling for an invitation, are you? Forget it.'

'Like Professor Vicars?'

'What does that mean?'

Plant shrugged. 'Or didn't he mess up the house? Minimal footprints, carbon, sand and mud?'

'Once in a while he visited.'

'Like you visited him in Sydney.'

'Yes.'

'Where's your flatmate?'

'I told you, there isn't one. The deal with the house is . . .'

'Yeah, yeah, no sharing. So how come your flatmate's boyfriend put the hard word on you? An imaginary flatmate, was it? I used to have one when I was a kid. Though not a flatmate, just an imaginary friend. He lived over on the horizon, on the ridge the sun used to set behind.'

'How touching,' she said.

'Well, if we're into tactility . . .'

'Are we? You don't look the touch feely type to me.'

'So where's the flatmate? Out of touch?'

'Yes, gone.'

'And her boyfriend.'

'Took him with her.'

'Were they ever here?'

'You're the snoop, you tell me,' she said. Smiling sweetly. Delightfully, even, if it hadn't been at the same time vastly annoying and irritating.

She fingered the buttons on her shirt, the only two actually in their buttonholes. Then she ran the tip of her tongue along her lips. Slowly. Provocatively. Or parodically. The uncertain pleasures and punishments of ambiguity. Perhaps.

'The truth is . . .' she said.

'Ah,' Plant said, searcher after the truth, always glad to hear it,

never convinced that what he heard was it, but always ready to give it a go.

'The truth is,' she said again, a reiteration not necessarily convincing, 'after that email business we got sort of, well, paranoid. I thought you might have been working for that stupid *Dark Side*. Doing another number on him, you know, breaking and entering and trying to find things.

'What sort of things?'

'Oh, the unspeakable, you know. Copies of *Men Without Women*. DVDs of *The Ladykillers*.'

'You thought I was from *The Dark Side*.'

'Yes.'

'You didn't say so.'

'Well, I wouldn't, would I? Start looking paranoid, they'd really love that, wouldn't they? Something else to write about, something else we must be concealing.'

'So there wasn't a flatmate's boyfriend hitting on you?'

'No. I remain unsullied.'

'What were you doing there in Sydney?'

'Just picking up stuff for Tim.'

'And where was he?'

'Up here.'

'Ah.'

'Where else would he have been?'

'Hiding out?'

'He wasn't hiding.'

'Just getting out of Sydney.'

She gave a shrug.

'So this is where he was when he disappeared.'

'He hadn't disappeared.'

'His wife said he had.'

'What would she know?'

'Well, she was married to him.'

'Joke,' she said.

'Joke?'

'Look, it was over. He wanted out. He'd had it with her. He was this straight, careerist guy, got married young, decided he needed a wife like he needed a job. And so the years passed. Then he got this decriminalisation project.'

'And?'

'It blew his mind. And he wanted out. He'd never done dope before. You know, apart from the odd "I never inhaled" number at some faculty dinner party. But hanging out up here he really got into it. And he realised he didn't like his life. His marriage, his work, the lot of it.'

'He freaked out.'

'No, he wasn't freaked out, he was ecstatic. He'd never dropped mushrooms or acid before. It blew his mind. He loved it. He saw a vision of the coming of the Lord. Of something, anyway. And he was enthralled. Enraptured.'

'So you were living up here and he was up here too, getting wiped out . . .'

'Getting his head together,' she corrected.

'I somehow got the impression you were living in Sydney.'

'No.'

'You're living here.'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Why am I living here?'

'Yes.'

'Why wouldn't I?'

It was time for the shrug, more questions and answers not advancing things much.

'But you're attached to the university?'

'Yes.'

'And you're living here.'

'Where my work is.'

'Work?'

'My research project.'

'Which is?'

'The culture of the counter culture.'

'Ah.'

'You see?'

He nodded.

'And this is in what department? Ancient History? Pharmacology? Cultural Studies?'

'Yes,' she said.

'What do you mean "yes"?'

'All of them. It's interdisciplinary.'

'Is that so?'

'Everything's interdisciplinary these days,' she said, untying the sarong and retying it in one swift, dextrous, seductive manoeuvre. 'Except undiscipline.'

'Is that a word?'

'Undiscipline, indiscipline,' she offered. 'Indulgence, irresponsibility, freedom, liberation. Take your pick.'

Like Eve offering Adam a free go at the fruit tree. And he was tempted, like most of Adam's sons.

'Was this the same as Vicars' project?'

'It was complementary. A good fit.'

'So you worked together?'

'I was going to write a chapter for his book.'

The old 'play your cards right and I'll get you a publication' number.

'Did he spend much time here with you?

'What's much?'

'Depends on how much you want. Or don't want, I guess.'

'Oh, I want. I always want.'

Down, wantons, down, he told himself.

'Can we quantify that?'

'Like how many times a night, do you mean?'

'I wasn't thinking in those terms.'

'Poor you,' she said. 'What terms do you think in?'

'Was he a regular visitor?'

'What is regularity? Was he a regular guy?'

Fuck you, Plant thought. In all its ambiguity.

'Was he staying here when he died?'

She lobbed it back. 'He didn't die here.'

'Is that so?'

'He was found on the beach.'

'Was he staying here at the time?'

'I guess he could have been. Unless he came down from the Gold Coast.'

He tried looking at her. She looked back.

'Which?' he asked.

'Yes, he was probably here. It's hard to remember.'

'It's hard to remember the day he died?'

'Day? Night? Who knows when he died?'

'Why do you say that?'

'Well, they don't do they? Know when he died.'

'You're saying it was night?

'I'm not saying anything.'

Plant did the strong, silent number again. Silent, anyway.

'I've said enough,' she said.

Not as far as Plant was concerned.

'Did his wife know about you?'

'She had to.'

'Had to?'

'Sure. She watched him like a hawk.'

'A hawk?'

Hovering above the fields, poised to kill.

'I tell a lie,' she said. 'Hawks are too human. She was like a drone. A remote control drone. Alienated and mechanical. And lethal. I don't know how he'd put up with it for so long. Like living with a robot. Bloodless. Digital doll. That's why he took the Sydney position. To get away from her constant surveillance.'

'You met her?'

'Not if I could help it. I'd seen her around.'

'You didn't take to her?'

'You could say that.'

'I just did.'

'So why are you asking?'

Why was he asking? Why wasn't he asking her what he really wanted to know? But he didn't need to. She gave him the answer unprompted.

'If you're looking for who killed him, why don't you start with her?'

'You're saying he was killed?'

'I don't know. He just wasn't the sort of person to kill himself.'

Plant waited. Who knew what sort of people killed themselves? Not Plant.

'He was too . . .' She tailed off. 'He had too many things going. He always had these schemes, these plans.'

'Schemes?'

'Oh, you know. Ideas for projects. Places to go to. Travel. He was always phoning up someone or other. And he still was. It's not like he'd given up and stopped.'

'What sort of places?'

'Oh, I don't know. Just upping and going. Getting away. Asia maybe. Another time it would be back to America. He had all these contacts all over the place.'

'But you don't know of any specific plans.'

She shook her head.

'I'm not making it up.'

'No, I know you're not.'

'I just never took much notice. He was always planning things. Most of the time they never happened or he changed his mind. Is it important?'

'Could be. Probably not. It would just be confirmation. But I believe you.'

He didn't know why. Other than he had no reason not to believe her. Not on this topic, anyway.

'And he was still like that? Even after that email business?'

'He didn't care about that. Not in the end. He just wanted out. Out of the job, out of the marriage. He was going to leave.'

'For you?'

'I don't see what that has to do with anything.'

'It might have given her a motive.'

'She didn't need a motive.'

'What do you mean?'

'She was a cold-hearted bitch. She'd hated him for years.'

'How do you know?'

'Because he told me. How else?'

'And you believed him?'

'Yes, I believed him. And if you'd ever met her, you'd believe it too.'

'I have met her,' he said.

'Well there you are. Now you know.'

'Maybe.'

It was as much as he wanted to concede, more even. But not enough for Bess. She gave a contemptuous snort.

'Up to you,' she said. 'If I didn't know the university leaked those emails, I'd have said she did it.'

'How do you know the university leaked them?'

'Well I don't, do I? Someone told Tim. They'd said the system hadn't been hacked into, they'd done a check, so presumably someone in their IT department had leaked them. But that could've been bullshit. It could've been her. She knew his password.'

'How do you know she knew his password?'

'Because he told me. You don't believe me, do you? You don't know what she's capable of.'

That was true. He didn't believe Bess. He didn't know what Kate was capable of. It all gave him an uneasy feeling. Corrosive doubt. Disabling anxiety. Negative incapability.

Chapter Nineteen

Plant ran through the details, such as they were, with Fullalove.

'I need to get hold of the autopsy results,' he said.

'You don't,' Fullalove assured him.

'What do you mean?'

'You wouldn't want to. You're not hankering after a visit to the morgue, surely. With your sensitive constitution. You're not wanting to get dressed up in scrubs and stand there watching someone wield a scalpel into the cold flesh and all the rest of that distasteful carry on they insist on putting into all those crappy crime shows you watch on television.'

'That I watch on television?'

'That we all watch. Most distasteful. Surely you're glad not to have to attend all those autopsies, the high pitched buzz of the circular saw, the foul odours, the naked pudenda, the vomit into the waste bin.'

'I'm happy to pass.'

'Of course you are. I've never taken you for a necrophiliac.'

'I still need the autopsy results.'

'Normally,' Fullalove said, 'or at least according to the crime shows, you'd have a source at the morgue. Alternatively you'd hack into their records.'

'I don't have a source.'

'Yes you do.'

'Who?'

'Uncle Toby of course. You mightn't have a direct source but he'll have one, so if you ask him he'll tell you and that's as good as having

a source. Indeed, it is a source. Indeed . . .'

'OK, OK, I get the message. I've already spoken to him and he didn't know anything.'

'How do you know he's telling the truth?'

'Uncle Toby? I don't know, obviously.'

'Alternatively,' Fullalove offered, unsubdued, in full informational flow, 'alternatively you could ask the widow.'

'Vicars' wife?'

'Widow, now.'

'And she'd know?'

'She'd be the first to know. Or so you'd hope. Unless, of course, the police view her as a suspect.'

'She's not a suspect,' Plant said. Too readily. Fullalove grinned.

'Not to you, clearly. Police might think differently.'

That slim, black clad, grieving figure. Assuming she was grieving. Of course she might not have been.

'You can but ask.'

'And if she says no?'

'Then you call Uncle Toby again. In fact you could just call Uncle Toby and not go pestering the widow.'

'I'm not pestering her.'

'Still fancy her, do you?'

Lordly disdain was the only response. Lord Plant. As he'd announce to the security guard at the gate next time he went to see Mrs Vicars.

'Right you are,' Fullalove said. 'No need to answer that one. Pretty obvious what the answer is. Only question is, what if anything are you going to do about it?'

What he did about it was phone Mrs Vicars, Kate, and ask her to

let him know as soon as she heard anything.

'It was poisonous mushrooms. Death caps. Psilocybin. The police told me.'

Plant stood there holding the phone, struck dumb again, what was there he could possibly say?

'Amanita phalloides,' she said. 'Why would he have eaten them?'

'And psilocybin,' Plant added.

'Yes.'

'Magic mushrooms,' Plant said. 'Psilocybin is their active ingredient. It's hallucinogenic but it doesn't kill you. But death caps do. Maybe the death caps got mixed in with some gold tops. Maybe he was planning a mushroom trip and picked a wrong one.'

'Is that possible?'

'Possible. Unlikely, though. They don't look alike. Gold tops all have a distinct gold top. The stems go purple when you break them off. You always check.'

'Check?'

'So you don't get some toxic look-alike toadstool. Gold tops and purple meanies always go purple, the others don't.'

'So what happened?' she asked.

It was not the sort of question that Plant could answer, not having been there at the time.

'It's possible he made a mistake. Or someone gave them to him.'

'Accidentally?'

'Possibly. But unlikely.'

'What, unlikely that someone gave him them?'

'Unlikely it was accidental.'

'You're saying someone poisoned him?'

'I don't know,' Plant said. 'But it's hard to see how it could have been accidental. They're totally different looking mushrooms. Anyone who knows anything about mushrooms knows death caps are totally lethal. As their name suggests. And it's not a way to kill yourself. Mushroom poisoning . . . ' He stopped himself. Pretty well in time. Without going into the far from painless effects of mushroom poisoning in remorseless detail. 'I don't think he would have eaten them knowingly. Or voluntarily. More likely someone must have fed them to him.'

'Without telling him.'

'Presumably.'

She burst into tears. Not that Plant could see them, standing there holding the phone. But that was how it sounded, Kim barking protectively at his mistress's distress.

'I've got to go,' she said, sniffing back her tears, snuffling noises anyway, and hung up.

'He couldn't have eaten them accidentally, surely.'

'Hard to imagine he was that dumb,' Fullalove agreed.

'And not a way to kill yourself. Besides, there's no suicide note.'

'Agreed,' Fullalove agreed again.

'Someone must have fed them to him. Mixed in with magic mushrooms.'

'So who do you reckon for it? Young Bess or the not quite so young widow?'

'If I can take your mind off women for a moment,' Plant said.

'*My* mind?'

Fullalove was convulsed with mirth. Or affected to be. Probably affected to be. Mirth was not a characteristic of his world view.

'Before you decide on no evidence that a woman did it . . . '

'*Cherchez les femmes*,' Fullalove said. Characteristically. A more characteristic note than mirth.

They sat on Plant's verandah in the fading afternoon. Fullalove blew smoke rings with the perfection of long practice, keeping the mosquitoes at bay. Clouds of midges were doing their collective spiralling rise and fall, a dance, a vortex, calisthenics. A few outsiders climbed and dived on their own at the distant periphery of the clouds. Plant watched them all, society and outsiderdom.

'If he was snooping around checking out the dope scene he could have trodden on someone's toes. Got in the way and . . .'

'He was an academic,' Fullalove said. Scornfully. 'He wouldn't have been doing any leg work. He'd get it all from the internet. No hard slog over the territory for people like him. He was an internet freak, we know that.'

'I still think we should check out the dope scene.'

'Could be many lifetimes' work.'

'Round here.'

'Maybe just half a dozen incarnations.'

'Since when were you into reincarnation?'

'It's the ambience round here.'

'Whereas in inner city Newtown you feel that one life's more than enough?'

'I love Newtown.'

'Sure.'

'I love the inner city.'

'OK, OK, you've passed the loyalty test. Let's check out the scene for a couple of days and then you can go back.'

'I don't want to go back. I like it here.'

There were times when saying nothing was the best option. More and more often, Plant found. Pretty well a default position. Learned

from experience.

'Silence is gold tops,' Fullalove offered. Neither pertinently nor meaningfully. One more contribution to the archive of failed epigrams. Let nothing be unrecorded. Let nothing be irretrievable. Except youth and innocence and all those sort of things.

Chapter Twenty

First call was on Max, Plant's dealer of choice. Description of subject, dwelling and grounds withheld.

Usual polite salutations.

'How're you going?'

'Shocking. Terrible. You won't believe what happened to me. I died. Twice. Hideous. I didn't think I'd survive. I thought it was the end of me.'

'Great,' Plant said. 'You're still alive.'

'Only just,' Max said, pinching his wrist to check.

To have someone tell you how their health or lack of it is when you ask them how they are was something Plant felt he could do without. What they used to call the height of bad manners. Back when codes of salutation were recognised and observed. Now the details had to be gone into before they could get down to business. The shortness of breath. The pain in the chest and along the jaw. Oblivion. The helicopter. Airlift to hospital. More oblivion. Finally, resurrection.

'That's terrible,' Plant said, encouragingly. 'You got a smoke there? I feel quite queasy.'

'Imagine how I felt.'

'I can't bear to.'

Max rolled up a joint and passed it across to Plant. Sample the product. Consider. Reflect. Place an order. Basic prerequisites when asking for information.

Plant produced the photograph Mrs Vicars had given him.

'Vicars? Yeah, I knew about him.'

'Did you know him?'

'No way.'

'Why's that?'

'Why would I? Someone snooping around advocating decriminalising dope. I'd have to be mad.'

'You thought he was snooping.'

'No idea. No point running risks, though, is there?'

'So you do have an idea.'

'Yeah, well. I mean, even if he was real, someone would still be watching him, wouldn't they, to see who he hooked up with. He was so bloody public about it. You wouldn't want to be seen anywhere near him. Not if you were me, anyway. You'd want to keep well away from him if you'd got half a brain. Which is about all I've got left. Oxygen deprivation. When I died.'

'So you kept out of his way.'

'Sure did. Never met the man. Can't tell you anything about him.'

'But he was around.'

'Yeah, he checked in. All the right places. Blues festival, Mardi Grass, Naked Bike Ride, Writers' Festival, bookshop events. He'd be there. On the programme. Or asking questions from the floor. Nothing low profile about him.' Max took a long toke, held it in, relishing it, letting it out slowly. 'He looked the part all right. Hemp shirt, faded jeans, braided canvas belt, canvas shoes, no leather, scrupulously vegetarian get up. Blended in. But sort of stood out, if you know what I mean.'

'I can't say that I do.'

'Well, your average third generation subsistence hippy just wears whatever's cheapest. Op-shop stuff, Vinnies, Salvos. Somehow he always looked a bit too well groomed.'

'What did you make of him?'

'Nothing much. Like I told you, enough to keep away.'

'Why, though?'

'Because he was too much out there. Going on about decriminalisation like he'd just had his first smoke. Too vocal. Too fucking enthusiastic.'

'How did that go down?'

Max shrugged.

'Heard it all before.'

'What do people think about it? Like the growers. Don't they depend on it being illegal?'

'Good point. They're onto it.'

'And what's the general consensus?'

'You've got to be joking. Consensus? Round here?'

'Could he have annoyed people?'

'Not hard to do.'

'But seriously enough to get himself into trouble?'

'What's happened? Somebody bump him off?'

'Could be. I don't know.'

'Why are you so interested?'

'He's disappeared.'

'Wife bump him off?'

'She's hired me to find him.'

'Doesn't mean she didn't.'

Plant left it at that. No point protesting that he didn't see her as a killer. It would only produce the same cynical response as Fullalove's. Plant was trying to transcend cynicism. Let alone misogyny. He certainly didn't need to hear it from others.

'But you don't think she did,' Max persisted, inevitably.

'No.'

'Fancy her, do you?'

'She's an attractive woman,' Plant found himself saying.

If he couldn't block Max's insinuations, at least he could try and make him envious. Undermine his domestic harmony. Remind him of what he was missing out on. Assuming he was missing out.

'They always are,' Max said, whether wistfully or sardonically it was hard to tell, that slow, stoned delivery, somewhere between servile agreement and cynical dismissal.

'I've found so,' Plant agreed.

'Keeps you young.'

'So they say.'

'Or under the delusion that you still are. Which you aren't,' he added. Unnecessarily.

'He was doing some dope book,' Plant said. 'Did you hear anything about that?'

'Haven't seen it.'

'It hasn't been published yet.'

'That explains it, then.'

'So he wasn't going on about it.'

'Not that I heard. Why would he?'

'Sort of thing people go on about when they're hanging out round the scene. Make out he was some sort of big shot.'

'Big shot? No. Big shots don't have time to hang out places. Big shots get other people to do that for them.'

'People like Vicars?'

Max enjoyed the opportunity for the telling silence, for intimations of mysteries not to be revealed.

'I died, you know. I was clinically dead. In the helicopter.'

'Your spirit had risen up but the helicopter reconnected with it as it ascended.'

'Could be,' Max agreed, licking the gum along the edge of a rolling paper.

'But it hasn't stopped you smoking.'

Max looked at him with the baleful eyes of a beagle. A sniffer dog focussed on the next block of hash or stash of heads.

'Are you saying Vicars could have been some sort of gopher for some big shot?' Plant persisted.

'I didn't say anything.'

'But you implied . . .'

'No I didn't. I was clinically dead, you know.'

'You're not answering me.'

'Wouldn't want to risk an early death again.'

'Not that early, not any more,' Plant reminded him. Unnecessarily. But why not?

'The thing is,' Max said, 'grass is mellow. Keeps you calm. Good for the heart, reduces stress. You have a smoke and you have a rave. You don't go disturbing the peace with leaf blowers and power saws and wood-chippers and mulchers and all that barbaric shit. Riding trail bikes and quads and SUVs and desecrating the environment. You sit there quietly raving and have ideas. Human communication, that's what it's about. Sociability. The last hope against all that technological alienation consumerism's locking everyone into.

'That's why they fear it. Because it facilitates ideas. Doesn't generate them. It facilitates the ideas you have within you. Or have access to. It's not creating them. It's not another force taking you over, like a mind parasite. It allows you to fulfil your potential. Lets you see things you otherwise wouldn't know about. Like mind parasites, it lets you see them. And triumph over them. Lets you shut them out

of your consciousness. Cut off their oxygen.

'So, you know, you see someone like this Vicars bloke around, you just have a smoke and you know, you see that he's trouble and bad news and a waste of space, so you just block him out.'

'And you did that?'

'Did what?'

'Blocked him out.'

'Sure, that's what I'm telling you, that's why I can't tell you anything about him. Just made sure I never got to know him. Or vice versa. Which was more to the point. Stay stoned.'

'Life, be out of it,' Plant said.

'Yeah, man, that was the best selling badge of the seventies. Outsold the disarmament symbol.'

He took out another rolling paper, filled it sparingly with tobacco, rolled it up, licked the gummed edge, lit it, inhaled.

'You forgot the dope,' Plant said. After that rave about the virtues of the herb.

Max shook his head.

'It's the tobacco,' he said. 'Can't give it up. It was easier to give up grass. I did, at first. You know, after I'd died. And then eventually I rolled up a number. Just grass. And it didn't do it. I mean, it got me stoned, right. No problem. Not complaining. I'm not knocking it. But there was still something missing. You know what it was? It was the tobacco.'

'It's the tobacco that counts,' Plant intoned. 'Those old copywriters knew a thing or two.'

'They sure did.'

'You could try chewing tobacco. Nicotine patches.'

'Aw, man, don't complicate things, they're complicated enough already. I just like to have a smoke. It's no big deal. Here, roll yourself

a number without tobacco, if you prefer.'

Plant did prefer. Did as he was told. While Max held forth.

'It's probably not the tobacco that's bad for you but all the chemicals and additives and preservatives and whatever shit they put in with it. Almost certainly. So if they legalise marijuana, is it going to be processed and preserved and packaged with who knows what additives and chemicals and mind destroying substances? Without a doubt. So are we in favour of keeping it illegal? Sure are.'

'Funny old world,' Plant said. 'Like I used to be against the idea of the monarchy. All for a republic. Until I started to think about what sort of people would end up becoming president.'

'What sort?'

'Unthinkable.'

'That would be right,' Max agreed.

'The reality is you find there's no position you can take on any of these issues. The alternatives are equally unacceptable. Ah, well. I guess that's parliamentary democracy.'

'Good dope, isn't it,' Max said.

'Anyone else who might know?' Plant asked, preparing to leave, purchase completed.

'About Vicars?'

'Yes.'

'You want me to suggest someone who might have bumped him off?'

'If he was bumped off.'

'And if he wasn't?'

'I'd still like to talk to someone who might have met him.'

Max sucked reflectively at the hollows of his teeth, making strange

squeaking sounds like a nest of fledgling birds.

'You could try Nick, maybe. He's big on the gossip.'

'Is he a grower? Or a dealer?'

Max shrugged.

'And he'd know?'

'He's been around for ever. Keeps a sort of open house. Used to, anyway. You know, sit around the kitchen table and roll up a number and you know . . .'

'Gossip.'

'Don't knock it.'

'I don't,' Plant said.

'No, I guess you don't. Your stock in trade, pretty much.'

'Pretty much,' Plant agreed. 'Though I've never quite known what stock in trade means.'

'Look it up in a dictionary some time, why don't you?' Max recommended.

'Where would I find Nick?'

Max ripped a strip of paper off a copy of *The Nimbin Good Times* on the kitchen table and wrote down a number.

'Best to phone first,' he said. 'And not from here.'

Chapter Twenty-one

Plant's position on mobile phones was cautious. As anyone's would be who had been subjected to Fullalove's raves. Basically he used his landline at home, except for people he preferred not to phone from a landline in his name. The answer phone served to receive messages, he didn't need to be on call twenty-four hours a day. He didn't routinely give out his mobile number to clients. The point of being self-employed was to avoid being at the beck and call of other people. He changed the answer phone access code when he thought of it, so it couldn't be hacked into too easily. On some cases he carried a mobile, on others not. When visiting dope dealers and growers, he didn't carry a phone. No sense in being trackable on such errands. Indeed he agreed with Fullalove in preferring not to be trackable at all. On any errands.

As Max had suggested, Plant phoned Nick before calling round. From a phone box. It was always best to phone some people before dropping in on them. They didn't appreciate the knock at the door and the unheralded visit. And Plant preferred not to let too much time elapse between the phone call and the visit. He didn't want to find an unmarked surveillance vehicle waiting for him as he arrived. Let alone a marked police car, sniffer dog and arresting officer as he departed.

With Nick you could not even get through the gate without phoning first. Signs attached to it announced 'Say No to Gas Seam Mining' and 'Lock the Gate: To Coal and Gas Companies Warning: Trespass is an offence.' The idea was that if you kept the gate locked then legally surveyors couldn't come in and prospect. It was good cover. Now there seemed nothing odd about long haired freaks and subsistence living hippies padlocking their gates to preserve all the possessions they didn't have. Even putting up closed circuit security

cameras. No longer remarkable in the age of surveillance.

Nick was standing on his verandah watching Plant drive up the track. Substantial timber house. Well maintained. He was in a striped football jersey, stomach bulging over the waist of his faded navy blue football shorts. Striped football socks and multi-coloured trainers, laces untied, completed the outfit. Maybe once he had been a player. Way back. Before developing the stomach. He waited while Plant and Fullalove got out of the car, no unnecessary movement down to greet them.

'Take a seat,' he instructed in the prefectorial tones of a private school rugger bugger, pointing to four green canvas director's chairs round a wooden table on the verandah. They sat.

'Grade one or two?' he asked.

It was like being at primary school.

'Maybe one of each,' Fullalove said.

'Same,' Plant said.

Nick turned, somewhat ponderously, a shuffling sort of movement, and opened his front door. They heard the click as he secured the lock behind him. Plant looked through the window from where he sat on the verandah. Polished timber floor. Scattered rugs, good quality. Comfortable looking chairs. Expensive looking light fittings. A general air of cleanliness and care. House pride. All several grades up from the way Plant lived. The wall opposite the window was adorned with a display of old record sleeves, seventy-eights, forty-fives and LPs, attached to the wall like tiles, each one edged flush against the the other, row upon row. Classic jazz. Classic modern jazz predominantly. Modern in the sense of sixty or seventy years back. Miles Davis, Chet Baker, Dexter Gordon, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane.

It meant buying a couple more deals on top of what he'd bought from Max. Two each. Else why were the two of them there? Buying

one each wouldn't be excuse enough to elicit information. Three deals each would look excessive, like they were selling it on, and dealers tended to get funny about that, like all capitalist entrepreneurs their aspiration being monopolisation. They tended not to appreciate rival operations. Fuck competition. So a couple of deals seemed the best option. Anyway, it would keep.

'No it won't,' Fullalove said.

'Probably not with you around,' Plant agreed.

They sat on the verandah looking at the uncleared bush. Necessary cover from surveillance satellites and helicopters and drones. Good place to bury a body. A crow flew slowly above the trees, cawing mournfully. Or maybe it was a call of satisfaction, having just pecked the eyes out of some decaying corpse. Not one of your cheeriest of sounds, anyway.

'So what is this guy?' Fullalove asked. 'A source of information? Or a suspect?'

'We'll see,' Plant said.

He examined the deck. It was a good one, not one of the fall through the broken planks variety, but oiled, kept oiled, well maintained. It spoke care. Maintenance. Restoration. Money. A preoccupation with material things and their preservation, quite the polar opposite of Fullalove's urban hovel. Plant could appreciate the force of Fullalove's critique, even before it was delivered. He had also experienced the force of Fullalove's squalor. Squalor was perhaps too extreme a term. Bohemian indigence, perhaps. Perhaps not. Compared with this comfortable elegance, squalor was the word that leapt to mind.

Nick reappeared with four clip-seal plastic bags already filled. Had the days of scales weighing before your eyes already passed into history, like buying biscuits out of a tin, or apples from a box, or potatoes from a sack? Another of those rhetorical questions best unvocalised, the answer already known.

Business done, Nick produced a couple of ready-rolled joints.

'Try this,' he said, handing them one each, reaching out to light them, straight into it, no hesitation or inquiry or rolling them up beneath your nose and sniffing them and carrying on with the rest of the carry on carried over from the carry on of cigar smokers.

Fullalove inhaled deeply. As was his wont, as they used to say. He was seized by a paroxysm of coughing and choking and throat clearing and sneezing.

'Good stuff, hey?' Nick said, beaming at them.

Plant took a more tentative approach. Cautious, gentle inhalation.

'Shit,' Fullalove said.

'The very best,' Nick grinned. 'I'd be interested to hear what you think. We've been working on it.'

'What do you mean, working on it?' Fullalove asked, uncharacteristically red in the face, nose streaming, eyes watering.

'It's a new strain we've been developing.'

'What do you mean, developing?'

'Cross breeding.'

'How do you do that? Genetic engineering?'

It wasn't the sort of question Plant would have asked, any more than asking restaurateurs for their chef's signature recipes. But Nick was happy to explain.

'No mystery. Just basic common sense. You don't need to fuck around with chromosomes and DNA. You get some really good plant, top quality stone, keep the seeds, cross pollinate it with some other really good plant you've kept the seeds of. Bingo. Of course, it takes generations of plants to develop. But, in a nut shell, that's how you do it.'

'Not a matter of just opiating some common or garden shit?'

'Now why would I do that?'

There were too many possible answers. Fullalove gave none of them. Plant gave his best ingratiating smile of dissociation.

Plant produced the photograph.

'Vicars?' Nick said. 'No, never heard of him. Who is he when he's at home?'

'He's not at home,' Plant said.

'So where is he?'

'He's in the morgue.'

'He's what?'

'You haven't heard?'

'Heard what?'

'He's dead.'

'Dead, is he? Ah, well.'

'You don't seem surprised.'

'Why should I be? I didn't know the guy.'

'Fair enough,' Fullalove said.

'What do you mean, "Fair enough"?'

'Fair enough,' Fullalove said again, as if repetition would explain. 'No problem,' he added.

'Why should there be a problem?'

'You tell me,' Fullalove said.

'I'm not telling you anything. What are you guys up to? You come round here, claim you're buying dope, and start an interrogation.'

'Not claiming anything,' Fullalove said. 'We've bought the dope, haven't we? Paid for it with used, unmarked notes.'

Nick looked at them with a growing intensity. He said nothing, just looked. It was like his thoughts could be heard whirring in-

side his head, some primitive mechanical calculating machine, vastly slower than current state of the art computers, but effective nonetheless.

'So why all the questions?'

'Max thought you might have known him, that's all,' Plant offered, conciliatorily.

'No I didn't.'

'Fair enough,' Fullalove said again. Ill advisedly. Or maybe provocatively.

'He went missing,' Plant explained. 'His wife asked me to look for him. And he turned up dead.'

'Tough,' Nick said. 'So why are you bothering me about him?'

'He was hanging around the scene. He was into decriminalisation.'

'Was he now?'

'Max thought you might have bumped into him. Or know someone who had.'

'Had what?'

'Bumped into him.'

Nick got up. He stood there, hovering above them like a drone poised to strike. He turned and went back inside, shutting the door behind him again, keeping out the flies and mosquitoes. Blocking them from overhearing any conversation. Stopping them from souveniring his classic jazz covers.

'Better get going, I guess,' Plant said when he returned.

'No, mate, finish your smoke. Shouldn't be long.'

'What shouldn't be long?'

'He's down the paddock. He'll be back any minute.'

'Who will be?'

'The answer to your questions.'

'What questions?'

'The ones about your dead mate.'

'He wasn't a mate. I never even met him.'

'So why're you so concerned about him?'

'Like I told you, his wife asked me to look for him.'

'And now he's dead and you're still asking questions.'

'Just a few.'

'And why would that be?'

'Why would what be?'

'Why are you still asking questions if you know he's turned up dead?'

'Because he hasn't had any answers,' Fullalove said, complexion slowly returned to its normal pallor.

'I always find,' Nick offered, 'whenever I can't get any answers, the best thing is to have a smoke and relax, you know, and then maybe . . .'

'Sure,' Plant agreed, 'and then the ideas flow.'

'So why don't you guys just hang out here and wait for some ideas. And if you don't get any, you can ask my friend. He gets around more than I do.'

'Who's your friend?' Fullalove asked.

'The answer to all your questions.'

'Does he have a name?'

'Could have.'

'Like that, is it?'

'Like what?'

'Shrouded in mystery,' Plant offered, exhaling a shroud of smoke,

slowly, savouring it.

The magpies warbled, the butcher birds sang a selection of their songs, the kookaburras cackled.

'So just enjoy. Good stuff, hey?'

'Good stuff,' Plant agreed.

'I'll leave you to it. Got a couple of things to do. He won't be long.'

He left them sitting on the deck and went back inside, closing the door.

'Did you hear that?' Fullalove asked.

'No.'

'He turned the lock again.'

'So what? If he'd locked us in it might be a problem.'

'What do you mean?'

'If we were locked inside it might be a problem. Then we'd be stuck, wouldn't we? Trapped. But as it is we can just get up and leave.'

'You reckon?'

'Sure.

'Try it,' Fullalove said.

Plant tried it. He pressed his hands down on the arms of the director's chair but failed to rise. 'It's something else, this dope,' he agreed.

Fullalove made floundering gestures, waving his arms loosely, attempting to rise without success.

'Shit man,' he said, 'what are you up to? You didn't tell me what this guy was like. He's a full on psycho. Those record sleeves. Every one of those jazz players was into dope. Not just marijuana. Heroin, Benzedrine, you name it. They either died from it or went to gaol for it. It's a warning, man. It's a threat. You've got to take notice of these things. We've got to get out of here before he kills us. Like they

killed Vicars.'

'You're paranoid.'

'I am. I've never been so paranoid in my life. I can't fucking move.'

'It's the dope.'

'I know it's the dope. It's been doctored. I've been poisoned.'

'You haven't been poisoned. You're just not used to decent stuff. All that inner city hydroponic shit you live on, you've forgotten what the real stuff's like. Half the stuff you've been smoking wasn't dope at all, just dog hairs and rat turds. Fifty per cent THC free. You're not used to the real thing.'

'What do you mean, the real thing?'

'Henry James,' Plant said. 'One of his stories. One of the best. Coca-Cola just appropriated the phrase.'

'What the fuck are you going on about?'

'Attribution,' Plant said. 'Give credit where credit's due. Though come to think of it, hyper real might be more like it.'

'Hyper real?'

'It enhances reality.'

'Forget it, we've been poisoned. We're never getting out of here alive.'

He made more floundering motions with his arms. He tried raising his legs one at a time. Successfully. But he still staid stuck in the director's chair, not always easy things to get out of. Plant did not even make the effort. He sat back and grooved on nature. The sights and sounds. Birds, trees, all that sort of stuff.

'Why don't you come inside?' Nick called out to them from the doorway.

With difficulty they got to their feet, Plant offering Fullalove a hand and tugging him upright. They stumbled across the deck, through the door, past the room with the television and the record

sleeves, down a timber-panelled hallway. It opened into a room at the back of the house, similarly timber-panelled. The ceiling timber-panelled too, which created a certain oppressive air.

'It's like a coffin,' Fullalove said, looking round in horror.

But it was impressive, too, amazing, powerful, enfolding. Was it red cedar? It looked like it, this was one of the regions where the cedars had grown, where they'd been hacked out ruthlessly, four hundred year old trees, was this the work of a wealthy pioneer? Or a load of sawn planks fallen off a dray, nicked from somewhere along the track, maybe, or recycled from a demolished or abandoned homestead, maybe, had to be old, could never be afforded now. Unless you were a wealthy dealer, loads of cash to launder and translate into assets.

There was a solid looking timber table, six dining chairs around it. Nothing on it. No books. No books or papers anywhere, no bookshelves. An old compact disc player with wooden speaker boxes on a wooden shelf. No sign of any CDs. No sign of anything much, wooden slatted shutters closed on the windows. One central light fitting with a bare globe letting out a baleful light. Maybe Nick hadn't been able to find an appropriate wood-themed lampshade yet.

'It's like a sound box,' Plant said, looking round at the enveloping timber. 'Like being inside a guitar.'

'Yeah, amazing acoustics,' Nick agreed. He waited till they'd settled down at the table and then disappeared again, closing the door behind him. Maybe he was an obsessive door closer.

'You know what this is?' Fullalove whispered, a faint susurrus, fearful of being overheard even though no one was in the room, but that didn't mean it wasn't wired for sound with concealed microphones. 'This is a brainwashing cell. Look at it. Nothing in it. They're fucking with our minds. This is what they did in Korea. With captured servicemen. Prisoners of war. They doped them up and turned them. The Manchurian candidate. George Blake. He copped the biggest

sentence in British history. Forty-two years.'

'And he escaped,' Plant reminded Fullalove.

'So what? Nothing to do with it. That's not the point. The point is they'd brainwashed him in Korea.'

'Maybe. Maybe they didn't need to. Maybe the Koreans . . .'

'It was the Chinese advisers.'

'So maybe the Koreans and their Chinese advisers just gave objective accounts of British and American foreign policy. Hard evidence. The sheer enormity of it might have been enough. They didn't need to drug anyone to turn them.'

'They've drugged us,' Fullalove said.

'What with?'

'No idea. Something lethal they've synthesised.'

'As I recall you happily drugged yourself.'

'But I didn't know he'd doctored the joint, did I?'

'Why don't you just lie back and enjoy it, like the Chinese proverb says?'

'Cause I'm freaked out. We're never going to get out of here. Don't you realise that? We're going to end up like Vicars. Dumped in the ocean. Food for fishes. Sharks. Crabs. Sea snakes. Eaten alive.'

Fullalove was certainly showing all the signs of a bad trip. Bad acid. But unless the dope had been soaked in something or other, it was hard to see how that could have happened. Interesting that Nick had given them a smoke each but hadn't had one himself. Maybe he'd had one just before they'd arrived. Enough for a while. Though did anyone ever really have enough? As for being poisoned, Plant felt fine. Maybe Fullalove had absorbed a finally critical amount of THC over the decades, now so saturated with it, effectively pickled, that one more puff had flipped him over the edge. Could be as simple as that. The last straw. The camel's back. Plant considered the

possibilities with a benign detachment. He felt quite untroubled. Amused, indeed, that Fullalove, whose life mission generally seemed to be an attempt to freak out whoever he could with truths and fears that were usually repressed, had now freaked himself out. Or been freaked out, as Fullalove insisted, by his captors. Their captors, indeed. Though there was only one of them so far as far as Plant could see. And he did not feel captured himself. Captivated, maybe. Quite enjoying the disembodied feeling that the dope had induced. Indeed very much enjoying it, nothing 'quite' about it. And Fullalove's discomfiture was a welcome bonus. After all those years of being discomforted by Fullalove's insights and discoveries and disclosures of malignity and evil and the rest of the components of his universal conspiracy theory. Let alone his dog-haired and rat-turded dope.

But Fullalove was adamant the dope had been doctored, tampered with, laced with psychoactive substances.

'Of course,' Plant said. 'If it's good dope, strong stuff, it has to have been tampered with, doesn't it? Everything turns to ashes in your world.'

'Just the dope. Can't help it turning to ashes if you smoke it. You wanna eat it instead? You prefer it turning into shit?'

'I'm talking about your world view.'

'You got problems with my world view? You've implanted a bug in my brain and you don't like the line feed you're getting?'

'You're so negative.'

'Negative? Oh, man . . . '

'Why can't it just be good, natural, organic quality dope? You're off your head because it's good. Do you have to assume it's been tampered with?'

'You'd be a mug if you didn't. You may be right, hope you are, nice to think you can still get honest weed. But given what we know about the marijuana industry and its links to crime and the CIA and

Big Pharma, you've gotta ask.'

'Ask what?'

'Questions. Just ask questions. Don't take stuff on trust. Not, I hasten to add,' Fullalove hastened to add, 'that you do, except with women.'

'You're saying the dope's adulterated and I'm too trusting with women.'

'Something like that. Though there is the slimmest chance that the dope's alright and it's just your women who emanate adultery. Though I guess planning on having it off with a widow isn't adultery if the husband's dead and she's a widow rather than a wife. Dunno about that. There could be a statute of limitations. Maybe different in different cultures. Could be tricky. I'd tread carefully if I were you. Tread as in its barnyard connotations.'

'You're not me.'

'Nonetheless, given the empathetic qualities of this certainly powerful for whatever reasons dope, I feel I am you. I feel your pain.'

'What pain?'

'And not just your pain. I feel your sexual yearnings.'

'Get out,' Plant said. He wasn't sure why. Why he used that form of words. It sounded like an exorcism, expelling a succubus or incubus or disincarnate entity that had invaded him from the dark side.

'Yeah, man, no doubt about it, that's not just heavy duty weed, it's got some additives.'

He gave no sign of moving from his chair, no sign of responding to Plant's imperative. It was as if the spirits of the hemp seeds were gestating rapidly, putting out little filaments from Fullalove's THC saturated body tissue and tunnelling into the wooden back and seat of the chair and taking root, pinning Fullalove down there for ever, or at least for the duration, until harvest time.

Chapter Twenty-two

There was the sound of doors opening and shutting, footsteps. Nick came back into the room with a slightly-built, long-haired, goatee-bearded, seventies-style freak. Approaching his seventies, too. Faded denim work shirt, faded, worn jeans, Akubra hat, socks. Footwear taken off at the door, no mud trampled through this house.

'Klip,' said the newcomer, by way of introduction.

'What does that mean?' Fullalove asked. 'You want to punch our tickets or something?'

'It's what they call me. My name.'

'What sort of name's that?' Fullalove asked.

'A nickname,' Nick said. Raising the possibility that his own name was, too.

'What's in a name?' Klip responded.

'You tell me.'

'It's short for kleptomaniac in a post-colonial accent.'

'Postcolonial?'

'Like South African or New Zealand pronunciation.'

'Why?'

'Post-colonial theory was all the fashion back then.'

'Back when?'

'When I got called it. When we restored our houses.'

'Found materials,' Nick explained.

'Nicked,' Fullalove said.

Nick smiled amiably.

'The aesthetic of the available,' Klip said. 'Premature environmen-

tally-correct recycling. Way before it became mandatory.'

'What they used to call larceny,' Fullalove suggested. 'Grand theft farmhouse.'

'Nice one,' Nick said, heading off what might have been a confrontation. Though it equally well might not have been. It might have been prefatory to an informed discussion on the origins of nomenclature. But Nick moved them on. 'These guys are asking about someone called Vicars,' he said to Klip.

'Vicars?'

'Yes,' Plant said, showing the photograph. 'Do you know him?'

'Nah, didn't take to him.'

'But you knew who he was.'

'Nah. Saw him around. Kept my distance.'

'Why's that?'

'You get so you can smell 'em. You know.'

Plant knew. Fullalove knew. Klip knew. Nick probably knew too, which was why he was denying all knowledge of Vicars. How many other people knew?

'Mind you,' Klip said, 'I'm not saying he was necessarily up to anything.'

'No?'

'Could just have been your average straight weirdo. Harmless. Useless. Why do you want to know?'

'His wife asked me to find him and he's turned up dead.'

'Can't see why anyone would want to kill him. Can't see why they'd bother.'

'Why do you assume he was killed?'

'Why would you be asking about him if he wasn't?'

'Could be accident. Could be suicide.'

'Sure.'

'What did other people think about him?'

Klip shrugged. 'No idea.'

'You never talked about him to anyone?'

'Why would I?'

For obvious reasons, Plant reflected. Though there again, if you were a grower or a dealer or an opportunistic recycler and anxious that someone might be snooping around, you wouldn't go revealing your anxieties, because someone else snooping around might wonder why you were so anxious and draw the obvious conclusions. So yes, it was feasible that Klip hadn't talked about him, like he claimed. But Plant wasn't sure he believed him. But that was the sad nature of Plant's business, systemic disbelief.

He offered some background, traded some information in the hope of eliciting something in return. Vicars' project. Decriminalisation. If it had been his project.

'Look at it this way,' Klip said. 'They've been growing the stuff up here for fifty years. So for the sake of argument let's assume the big growers obviously have protection. Otherwise they wouldn't still be in business. So they're not going to be worrying about someone like your mate Vicars, whatever he thought he was up to. It's all sewn up. No one's going to be informing on them. Nothing to inform. It's all known. They're in with the cops on this. Keep it all sewn up. Keep it illegal. Keep up the profits and the kick-backs.

'The amount of work that's been put in, clearing, digging, planting, security. You wouldn't believe it. It's not just a matter of putting a few seeds in the ground and watching them grow. This is serious agribusiness. Out there in that heat. Or rain. When it's not a drought, it's pouring. Put that amount of work in, infrastructure, irrigation, pest control, it's a heavy investment. You've gotta get a decent return. Forget legalisation. That's strictly for the birds. It's

not going to happen. Too much money involved. Everyone would be growing it in their back yard if they made it legal. Imagine that. Bloody chaos. Why would anyone take any notice of some academic freak banging on about legalisation or decriminalisation? It's not going to happen. Why would he worry anyone? Why would they need to kill him?'

'But you still kept your distance from him.'

'Well you would, wouldn't you? No point looking for trouble.'

'So you thought he could have been trouble.'

'Anybody could be trouble, couldn't they?'

'On the other hand,' Plant said, into it, his mind racing, a thousand and one ideas jostling for expression, 'legalisation might not be that bad. Like it's legal to grow flowers and vegetables and fruit and stuff. Apples and plums and peaches and apricots and nectarines and paw paws and zucchinis and tomatoes and asparagus and artichokes and avocadoes . . .'

'Yeah, cool it, cool it,' Klip said. 'Spare us the gardening encyclopaedia.'

'Well, you're allowed to grow all that stuff, apples, plums, peaches . . .'

'Yeah, we got that. What's your point?'

'Well, even though people are allowed to grow their own, most of them don't. There's still a lot of money to be made in fruit and vegetable shops. And florists. And supermarkets. Though supermarkets tend to be bastards to deal with, forcing down the prices they pay primary producers. They'll squeeze you, best keep away from them. Market it as a quality product. Bigger margins. Gourmet prices. More profit that way. You don't want to get caught up in some price war. Like the milk wars and the Turkish bread wars.'

'Are these guys for real?' Klip asked.

'Fraid so,' Nick said. 'Two joint screamers. Can't handle their

dope. Must've never inhaled before.'

They shook their heads, Nick and Klip, saddened at the spectacle before them, at the flow of speech assailing their ears.

'Too many words,' Nick said.

Plant smiled at them amiably.

Fullalove had his head on the table and his hands over it, protecting it, like an ostrich with no sand to burrow into.

'Tobacconists are finished,' Plant added. 'No point looking for them, they've gone. Newsagents are on the way out too. Maybe you could try the health food shops. Though they're on the way out. And you'd be tangling with Big Pharma there, now they're taking over complementary medicines. No, I reckon the fruit and veg shops are still the best bet.'

Nick wandered off, Klip followed him out of the door. Fullalove offered nothing. Plant grooved on the grain of the timbered walls.

At some point, some time later, though time had expanded or dissolved or at any rate proved hard to calculate, Klip returned with a small, black packet, wallet sized, though bulkier. He took out some plastic device, loaded it, triggered it into his little finger, drawing a bubble of blood to the surface. He loaded another device with a testing strip, placed the strip against the blood and waited till a reading came up on the little screen. Fullalove watched with intense apprehension.

'Want me to do you?' Nick asked.

'No way. Do what?'

'Check your blood sugar.'

'No one's checking my blood. I'm not getting fucking AIDS from some fucking needle.'

'I'll put a new one in. All sterile and hygienic.'

'No way.'

'What about you?' Nick asked Plant.

'What's it for?'

'Glucose reading. You had a diabetes check?'

Plant shook his head.

'You should. How long you been doing dope?'

'Take the fifth,' Fullalove said.

'A while,' Plant said.

'How long?'

Plant shrugged.

'Get the munchies?'

'Of course.'

'Still?'

'Sure.'

'There you are then.'

'Where?'

'It'll kill you if you don't check it.'

'What will?'

'Diabetes. All that sugar and shit you eat every time you get stoned and get the munchies.'

Fullalove grunted. Dismissively, perhaps, but it was a hollow and haunted sound.

'Look at me,' Nick said.

He wasn't very attractive to look at. Maybe that was the point.

'I used to be as fit as the best of them.'

'Oh yeah,' Fullalove grunted. A sceptical grunt this time.

'Played football every Saturday.'

'Congratulations.'

'Now I can hardly walk. No feeling in the feet. Numb. And it's

creeping up the legs. Give it time and I'll be in a wheelchair.'

'Is that so?'

'Peripheral neuropathy,' Nick intoned.

It resonated there. Plant and Fullalove waited.

'Nerves down the leg not responding any more,' Nick said. He went on remorselessly. 'You can get it from radiation, alcohol, diabetes. You get diabetes from too much sugar and stuff. You eat too much sugar and shit when you get the munchies. You get the munchies when you get stoned. You get stoned when you smoke dope. So what I'm suggesting to you guys is I should check your blood sugar levels.'

'No fucking way,' Fullalove said.

'I'll pass,' Plant said, never one eager for the sight of blood, cerebral investigation more the nature of his business than blood letting, whether down mean streets or rural properties.

'You choice,' Nick said. 'Don't say I didn't warn you.'

'Now you have to give government health warnings when you sell dope, is that it?' Fullalove asked. 'I don't believe it.'

'It's for when they decriminalise,' Plant suggested. 'They'll have to put it on the packaging.'

'Suit yourselves,' Nick said, waddling out of the room again.

'Did you see that?' Fullalove asked, aghast. 'Trying to stick that fucking needle into me. The guy's a homicidal nutcase.'

'He's just overweight and trying to diet so he's perpetually hungry. So he checks his glucose reading to see if it's low enough for him to stuff some more unhealthy shit down his throat. Or healthy shit for that matter.'

'You reckon? How do you know?'

'It's my business.'

'What is?'

'Knowing things. I'm an investigator.'

'So why's he want to jab my fingers?'

'Maybe he fancies you and he's concerned for your welfare.'

'Get fucked.'

'I think it's you he has in mind.'

'Fuck off,' Fullalove said.

But they both sat there. Immobile. Immovable. Lapsed into silence.

'They're going to kill us,' Fullalove said.

'No they're not. Nick's a bloody ruin. He can hardly walk. He couldn't kill anyone. He can't even tie his shoelaces.'

'You don't have to be fit to poison someone. You saw that needle kit.'

'It was a blood glucose monitor.'

'Oh yes? And how sterile were the needles? They could be tipped with Ebola virus.'

'You've flipped, Fullalove, it's the dope, just cool it.'

'I know it's the dope. That's what I'm telling you. He's doctored it. We've been poisoned.'

'I haven't.'

'You're so fucked you can't even tell. We've got to get out of here while we still can.'

He pressed both hands on the table and raised himself. He moved uncertainly towards the door. Plant checked out whether his own legs still worked. They seemed to. He followed Fullalove out through the door and down the corridor to where they heard voices. Strains of Miles Davis on a sound system somewhere. *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud.* Ascent to the scaffold.

The kitchen was in a different style. Instead of bare panelled walls or framed record sleeves, it was embellished with enamelled display advertisements, great sheets of metal advertising beer and bleach and beef extract. All very nineteen-fifties. Maybe even nineteen-thirties. It was like being in a corner shop without any stock, put out of business by the supermarkets. The height of chic some decades back.

'These are probably worth a fair bit,' Plant remarked, conversationally.

'Saved from the tip,' Nick said, standing at the stove, aproned, stirring a substantial looking cast iron pot.

'By you?'

'They were being thrown out. On a pile of junk from a demolition site.'

'Waiting for the truck which never came to take them to the garbage tip that was never open,' Klip added. 'Saved from the grave robbers, as the archaeologists all say when they nick things.'

'They weren't nicked,' Nick protested. 'I rescued them. Nobody cared. Nobody knew the value of them.'

'But you did.'

'Sure.'

'And you didn't tell anybody.'

'Tell who? There was no one there. I saved them from certain destruction.'

'And now they're worth thousands.'

Nick gave a slow smile of satisfaction.

'As a collection,' he said.

Klip laughed.

'He likes to think he's less a thief than a curator of the nation's heritage.'

'It's not theft,' Nick said. 'It's valuable stuff and people just junk it.

It should be rescued and preserved.'

'By you.'

'By someone who values it.'

'You.'

Nick just nodded. He was not a man who liked too many words.

'You guys hungry?' Nick asked. 'You want a bite to eat before you push off?'

So they were going to push off. Or be pushed off. They hadn't been kidnapped. They were free to go, not incarcerated for mind control experiments. Plant thought of pointing that out to Fullalove. But it was hard to work out how to do that with Nick and Klip standing by. Offering sustenance. See, Fullalove, they're not trying to kill us, they're offering us food. He let it pass.

'Sure,' he said, having been experiencing the munchies for some time. He could feel the saliva secreting from his glands. 'Though I'm vegetarian,' he added.

'No problem. Mushroom soup,' Nick declared, brandishing his wooden spoon like the host of some television cooking show.

Fullalove was aghast.

'No, no, no, no, no,' he said, doing his mad monarch on the heath number, 'not for me. We should get going.'

He tugged at Plant's shirt sleeve peremptorily a couple or so times.

'Let's go.'

He was out of the door and heading for the verandah.

'I guess we should,' Plant said, 'go. Sorry and all that. Tempting. But no, gotta go,' the force of Fullalove's fear connecting with him, sort it out later, in the meantime yes, let's go.

Plant drove slowly down the track. Meditatively. Reflectively. The patterns of light and shadow from the trees. The crunching, crackling noise of the tyres on the gravel.

'Just fucking move it,' Fullalove said. 'Let's get out of here.'

'What's the rush?'

'What's the rush? Are you serious? They could've killed us. Mushroom soup, are you out of your head?'

'That's just your paranoia.'

'Mushrooms?'

'Local produce. In season. Very good for you. Healthy and all that.'

'Laced with death caps?'

'That is paranoid.'

'Better be paranoid than dead.'

'Why would they want to poison us?'

'They're killers.'

'Don't be insane. Why are they killers?'

'It's how they killed Vicars.'

'They didn't even know Vicars. They've got nothing to do with it. Like they said, they weren't worried about someone banging on about decriminalisation. It's all sewn up here. And everywhere else.'

'Can never be too careful. It might be sewn up but they could still have bumped him off. Just to be safe. They've got motive. And means. Mushroom soup.' Fullalove shuddered. 'That was a threat.'

'They were just offering us dinner.'

'A veiled threat. Still a threat. A warning to stop asking questions.'

'Do you plan to observe it?'

'Observe?'

'The threat. You plan to lay off the questions?'

'Do you?'

'I was planning to,' Plant said. 'With them, anyway. But I take your point. I could put them back in the frame. I don't see it, though. I think it's just the dope freaking you out.'

'Yeah, I was poisoned. Like a bad trip. Makes you paranoid.'

'Aren't you always paranoid?'

Fullalove did the not deigning to reply number. Unless it was not a number at all and he was seized with extreme paranoia, and some questions were not to be answered. Whatever, no answer was forthcoming.

Chapter Twenty-three

'Why?' Plant asked, standing out on the verandah in the cool of the morning, eating his healthy breakfast of oats and bran and apple juice, 'is Angela Dark up here?'

Ideally he added a few cashews and sultanas, but Fullalove had consumed them all.

'Look at me,' Fullalove answered from inside the house.

'What?'

'Look at me.'

'What are you doing? What am I supposed to look at?'

Fullalove seemed not to be doing anything. Sitting back in a chair and watching the American news on the principle of know your enemy. And confident that if what was watched on subscription television was monitored, the subscription was in Plant's name.

'Not me,' he said, 'Angela Dark. It's all look at me for people like her. She needs to be looked at, otherwise she'll dissolve into her component particles. Only by having the world look at her, or as minute a fragment of the world as she can mobilise, can she retain her identity. Any lapse in public attention will mean that she dissolves into the air and vanishes.'

'Really?'

'So she believes. Or fears, anyway. Fear is the great controller. Watch this news if you don't believe me.'

'And what's she afraid of?'

'Not being looked at.'

'Not afraid of dissolving into thin air.'

'No, it's like Pavlova, if I cannot dance I do not want to live. So

instead of having a life saving operation which would have had the side effect of her never dancing again, she preferred to die.'

'Angela?'

'No, Anna Pavlova.'

'What a fund of information you are,' Plant said.

'Yes,' Fullalove agreed.

'Apart from that, don't you find it interesting that Vicars is found dead up here and his nemesis and his agent and his bit on the side are all up here at the same time?'

'Interesting, sure. Interesting enough. Significant? You tell me.'

'I don't know any more than you.'

'So what are you going to do about it?'

'I don't know.'

'Are you happy with that?'

'It's called negative capability.'

'Is that so?'

'Keats.'

'If you say so.'

'When man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'

'Sounds like your job description. You should get it embossed on your business card. Give it that literary touch. "We mightn't be able to solve your case but we can engage in cultured conversation with you."'

'So what do you suggest?' Plant asked.

'What else? Why not ask her? Have a cultured conversation interspersed with a few literary touches.'

'Angela?'

'Who else?'

'Could do, I guess.'

'All you've got to do is find her.'

'Oh, I know where to find her,' Plant said. 'I have been here before.'

'Is that another quote?'

'Could be. So, do you want to come along?'

'I think I'll pass on the house calls, if that's all right with you.'

'Lost your nerve after Nick and Klip, have you?'

'I prefer not to lose my life.'

'Chicken.'

'Better a live chicken than a barbecued one,' Fullalove said.

Back in the forgotten past when Angela Dark had been an alternative journalist, before she became a mainstream columnist, after which she was retrenched and became an alternative internet journalist, she had been one of a group that had lived on a farm in the environs of Mount Warning. Putting out an alternative paper, an underground paper as they called it in those days, deeply inauthentic. Plant had visited the farm years later, when Angela was visiting her contemporary from those days, Rose, who still lived there. If Angela was likely to be staying anywhere it was there with Rose, surrounded by passion fruit vines and paw paws, mangos and mandarins, oranges and lemons, macadamia nuts and pecans, the comprehensive planting and fruiting that Plant had still not got around to on his own lantana farm. It made him envious. He admitted that, as he drove up the rutted track, trees blossoming and fruiting alongside, spring, summer and autumn in perpetual simultaneity, what could be more Paradisal, and why should achieved Paradise provoke envy and resentment, why? Mount Warning leaned over in admonition on the horizon.

He couldn't see why Angela would have been involved in killing Vicars. Why would she want to kill her story, when she could continue harassing him with new leaked emails and whatever else showed up? Surely she would want to keep hammering away. There was feminist outrage, of course, at his unacceptable thoughts and language. But did that take priority over her identity as a journalist? Look at me, I'm a feminist. Look at me, look at my regular by-line. He figured she was a journalist, or gossip monger, or muckraker first. Causes would always take second place. Not a bad place. And it was useful to have causes. Maybe essential, even, sometimes. But the by-line would take priority.

Still, here she was up in the Valley of the Weed and here was Vicars, dead. The coincidence, if that was all it was, had to be checked out. It was tempting to think that on top of everything else she was a murderess. But he rather doubted that she would be. Not that she wasn't fierce.

'You think I killed him? Is that what you're implying. I don't believe you, Plant, now I've heard everything. Why would I kill him? I'd rather he'd stayed alive and suffered. Every minute of the day. Unemployable. A pariah. An untouchable. An academic leper. Unable to change his suppurating spots. That would've given me great joy. That would be what I call job satisfaction.'

'So it's just coincidence that you're up here when he's found dead.'

'What else could it be?'

'You didn't follow him up here?'

'I didn't even know he was here.'

'Where did you think he was?'

'I had no idea. Nor did I care, for that matter.'

'But you knew he was missing.'

'No. The first I knew was you coming round to the office.'

'And then you came up here.'

'I came up here to do a talk.'

'About Vicars.'

'About *The Dark Side*. He's not the only story we're running.'

'And when was that arranged?'

'Fucking months ago, smartarse.'

'Doesn't mean you didn't have a long term plan.'

'I don't have to listen to this nonsense.'

'True,' Plant agreed. 'So, you say you didn't kill him.'

Her face froze. Just stayed immobile. Not hurtling into a frown or a denial. Just that professional freeze. Plant was familiar with it. Had practised it himself a number of times. And not only before a mirror.

'You knew Vicars, though.'

'No,' Angela said.

'But you're in his book on the files.'

'So what? Doesn't mean I had to know the arsehole.'

'He just happened to publish your piece without any contact or communication.'

'His agent asked me.'

'Agent Orange?'

'Jacqueline, yes.'

'Why?'

'She was handling the book, she knew I had something to say on the topic.'

'So you never met him?'

'No, I am pleased to say. And now I never will, I am even more pleased to say.'

He watched the dragonflies and butterflies and bees buzzing around a sprawling rose bush beside the window as they sat there in

silence, Angela working up a head of steam, Rose comfortably out of it on a day bed on the verandah.

'How did he die?' Angela asked.

'You don't know?'

'No.'

Plant wasn't sure that he believed her.

'Mushroom poisoning.'

'Careless,' Angela said.

'I seem to remember you girls were adept at making mushroom omelettes.'

'Girls?'

'When you were girls. In the first flush of your youth.'

'Those were the days,' Rose said. 'How lovely of you to remember.'

Angela was less appreciative.

'And now you're accusing us of murder.'

'Not necessarily,' Plant said. 'It could have been accidental. I just had a memory of you feeding people magic mushroom omelettes.'

'Those were the days,' Rose repeated.

'Never heard of anyone being killed by magic mushrooms,' Angela said.

'He wasn't.'

'So what did kill him?'

'Death caps.'

'What are death caps? Sounds like something they used for headlines in the old tabloids. Nobody reads newspapers any more, anyway.'

'Amanita phalloides.'

'Is that so? No, I can assure you, I have no experience of making

death cap omelettes. How about you, Rose?'

'No, I don't think so. I guess I could always try. Is that what you want, Plant? Have you got the ingredients?'

The pigeons cooed, the whip birds made their whip cracking sound, somewhere distant a crow cawed. Over the ridge helicopters clattered, trying to detect marijuana plots.

'So why are you up here?'

'I live here,' Rose said.

'I was asking Angela.'

'Visiting my friend Rose. Doing a gig. Why shouldn't I be here?'

'At the same time that Vicars is found dead here.'

'Sheer synchronicity, I assure you. Hardly even synchronicity. No significance at all.'

'Why did I think you'd say that?'

'I've no idea, Plant. And I can't say I even care.'

'I wasn't saying you killed him.'

'Sounded like it to me. In your indirect, insinuating way.'

'I was just asking.'

'Asking if I killed him?'

'I thought you might have heard something. You used to be a journalist.'

'I still am a journalist.'

'Of course you are.' He gave it his best note of irritating condescension. 'I thought you still might have some contacts.'

'And why would I tell you if I had heard something? Why would I dob in somebody who'd done a good job in ridding the world of a piece of scum like Vicars?'

Plant said nothing.

'They deserve a medal, whoever it was.'

'And you'll be nominating them for the Order of Australia.'

'I might.'

'So you know who did it.'

'No, I don't know who did it, I have no idea who did it, and I don't care who did it.'

'So no medal.'

'Look, first I get accused of driving him to suicide by that mad creature at my talk, then you come bursting in up here and accuse me of poisoning him. Give it a go.'

'What sort of a go?'

'Get real. I'm a journalist. I don't go round killing people.'

'Even if they deserve it, in your opinion.'

'I wouldn't have time to write anything if I went round killing all the people who deserve it.'

'That's a good line,' Plant said. 'You should write that. Publish it in your scandal sheet.'

'And with a list of all the people you would kill if you had the time,' Rose added.

Angela glowered at them both.

'Maybe you could give their addresses, too,' Rose said.

'And a list of poisonous mushrooms and where to find them?' Angela said.

'Where do you find them?' Plant asked.

'I wouldn't have a fucking clue.'

'Ah, clues,' Plant said.

The pet carpet snake unwound itself from wherever it had been coiled and came purposefully along the verandah. Plant suppressed the urge to raise his feet from the decking. He found he had suppressed his breathing, too, paralysed with fear like a terrified rodent.

'It won't bite,' Rose assured him. 'And even if it does it'll only leave a bruise. It's not poisonous.'

'Not like death caps, anyway,' Angela said.

'What does it eat?'

'She's a she,' Rose said. 'She's called Boadicea. We feed her live chickens.'

'Only the male ones,' Angela added.

'We keep the females to lay eggs,' Rose said.

'For omelettes,' Angela said.

'But the males . . .' Rose said.

'Are useless,' Angela said.

'Except for snake snacks. If we run out of chickens we just feed her eggs.'

'Male ones,' Angela added.

'How do you know which are male eggs?' Plant asked.

'We sex them,' Rose said.

'She's a natural egg sexer,' Angela said.

Not that you could believe anything they said. Not that Plant did. Especially professional wordsmiths. Off the record or on the record was irrelevant. Journalists rarely cared whether their currency was true or counterfeit, the point was to pass it on and keep it circulating. Especially on the internet. Nothing Angela said could be taken at face value. Or any value. Or Rose, for that matter. Did she really feed live chickens to the carpet snake? Live male chickens. Young cocks. It was one thing not to take everything Angel or Rose said on trust. But it was all too easy to believe them about the carpet snake. He had no difficulty in envisioning them ceremonially sacrificing the live chickens. Live male chickens. The difficulty was in erasing the vision from his consciousness, removing it from where it had all too readily imprinted itself, wherever that was, neurosci-

ence or brain chemistry not areas in which he had expertise. And it was not just the image, the flurry of feathers, the squawks of terror. It was the implications. If they could do that to innocent young chicks, male chicks, what could they do to the guilty men of the world? Were there any restraints? Did they feel any compunctions? It sounded like the dairy industry, automatic death for male calves. Was he getting it all out of proportion? Was it just rural life, country ways? Did he really think Angela could be a killer? Was this just a pathetic masculine reaction to strong women and strong words? The manifestation of some fear-driven misogyny? A confirmation of irrational prejudice? The tortured relic of decaying patriarchy? All stirred up by a fear of snakes.

Herpophobia.

We have a word for everything.

Chapter Twenty-four

Plant phoned Agent Orange. She was still in Byron. Frightfully busy. All her authors of a certain age retiring up there. Reconnecting with their youth, the sex and drugs and rock-n-roll they'd never had or never had enough of and still pursued.

She agreed to meet him in the bookshop and was sitting there with a coffee, scowling and spluttering at the trash people were buying, the way they were failing to buy the trash her authors had written.

'Market research,' she said.

'You sit here all day?'

'I'm sitting here meeting you.'

'But keeping an eye on the trade.'

'Let's hope it's a sharper eye than yours. Your missing person turned up dead, I hear. Gave you the slip. Get a kick back from the funeral director, do you?'

'Usual agent's percentage.'

'Exorbitant. But so satisfying. Lets us know what we're worth.'

'In case there's any danger of forgetting.'

'I don't forget that he was one of my authors. I should sue you for loss of income.'

'Did he bring in any income?'

'And for defamation.'

'I only asked.'

'In this world that can be defamation.'

'So I can't even ask if you killed Vicars.'

'I should think not.'

'Think not what?' he asked. 'That you killed Vicars, or that I shouldn't ask you if you did?'

'Why would I kill Vicars? He was one of my authors.'

'And you were having an affair.'

'Exactly. Well, not exactly. You could hardly call it an affair. We had the occasional bonk.'

'Was it serious?'

'What's serious?'

'Was he unfaithful?'

'Of course he was, darling. Wife, girlfriend, bit on the side. He was an academic, darling. He was a writer, or thought he was. Played the part, even if he never got much written. But he wasn't alone in that.'

'And you were happy with that?'

'Why not? You think I was born yesterday? And no cracks about my age, thank you, I see your nasty mind at work. Why would I worry? Why would I care? It's only sex, darling. It's not as if it's hard to find. Or are you experiencing problems in that regard?'

'So it was all amicable.'

'Of course. He was all right. He didn't take himself too seriously. Well, why would he, after all? So, given all that, why would I want to kill him? Besides, he might have made me some money.'

'I thought you told me he was totally discredited after that email business. Like a truck of rotten fish, I think you put it.'

'Did I?'

'Quite a turn of phrase. Stuck in my mind. But now you say he might be a money earner. So was he discredited or not?

'Pretty much,' she said. 'But he wouldn't be the first. Discreditable bunch, writers. No reason to put them down, though. You don't have to kill them. Just let them dry out. They come good in the end. Some

of them.'

'So he wasn't a no-go area.'

'There are no no-go areas for publishers. The more they see no-go, the more they rush down there.'

'Down where?'

'Down whatever blind alley someone lures them into.'

'So he might have been marketable still.'

'Properly handled, yes.'

'And who better to handle him . . . ?'

'Than his agent. Yes. All that media exposure. Established a brand.'

'Well,' Plant said, 'that seems to clear that up.'

'Good.'

'One more thing,' Plant said, 'what about a book about his being killed? How marketable would that be?'

'More marketable than he would ever be alive,' she said. 'Why? You thinking of writing it? Got some juicy details? Send me an outline. One page, max.'

She gave him her fearful, predatory smile, fierce white teeth, glistening scarlet lipstick, frozen there for the camera of some long obsolete technology. There was no knowing what she meant, how sincere or cynical or calculated or natural she was, it was just an image without specific significance. Her brand.

'Look,' she said, meaning listen, 'it's more likely one of my authors would kill me than I would kill one of them. Resentful, ungrateful bunch. What's with killing one of them? They're like cockroaches, they're everywhere. In swarms. Stamp one out and another pops up. You can never get rid of them. All the time complaining. I get too much publicity for myself and they don't get any. Get real. I've got to get publicity. I've got to get out there. If no one knows who I am, how am I going to sell them? But all the time they want more. Still,

no reason to kill them. I get my revenge.'

'Revenge?'

'Sure. Give them the sales figures. That usually brings them back to earth.'

'All bad?'

'No. Just the particularly troublesome ones.'

'And was Vicars one of those?'

'No, not at all. He never seemed that concerned with that side of it.'

'Which side?'

'The money side. Unfortunately.'

'Was that a problem?'

'Not at all, darling. He left all that to me. Didn't meddle.'

'And the accounts are all above board?'

'Why wouldn't they be? Vicars' royalties weren't going to make anyone rich.'

'So why was he published?'

She gestured at the shop.

'Why is any of this published?'

'You tell me.'

'To make money.'

'But Vicars didn't.'

'It's a gamble. It's like the lottery. You toss the books out there and hope one of yours wins.'

'Is that so?'

'You got a better explanation?'

He could have quoted Fullalove: mind control, soft propaganda, censorship by saturation, depoliticisation, demoralisation, disinfor-

mation, and the rest of it.

'What about his decriminalisation book? Is that still marketable? The publishers haven't backed off?'

'Why would they?'

'The email business.'

'Not an issue. Not when there's up front money.'

'Up front money?'

'Cash in hand. A subvention, as they call it.'

'Vanity publishing.'

'No, not vanity publishing. We don't use words like that. He had some subsidy lined up. Always an effective sweetener. Pretty much standard practice for academic publishing these days.'

'Who from?'

'Does it matter?'

'It might.'

She shrugged.

'It could have been himself?'

'It could,' she agreed.

'How about the CIA?'

'Money's money,' she said, 'who cares?'

She seemed totally untroubled at his suggestion. No protestations of the absurdity of it nor moral outrage at the implications. Standard practice as she'd put it, after all, and no doubt not just for academic publishing.

'And you didn't ask.'

'Why would I? If he wanted me to know, he'd tell me. If he didn't, he'd lie. So why bother?'

'Do you think it could've got him killed?'

'What, getting a subsidy?'

'The book itself.'

'Why would it?'

'It's a heavy topic. Lots of people like things staying the way they are. Decriminalisation would mean they'd lose money. Nobody threatened you?'

'Me? Why would they?'

'To stop it from appearing.'

'The thing that stops books from appearing is their authors' laziness and publishers' incompetence. You don't need to threaten anyone. It's a miracle that anything ever appears.'

'But if the author gets killed, wouldn't that stop it appearing?'

'Might do. If it wasn't finished.'

'And this book?'

'Who knows?'

'You don't?'

'I don't know how much he'd got done, no.'

'So it might never appear.'

'True,' she said.

She didn't seem to care greatly. Was that significant? Were agents so uninvolved with their authors' projects? Did they have enough going on not to worry about any individual title?

'What about his book on the security files? Could that have got him into trouble?'

'Not that I heard. Why would it?'

'The security services mightn't have liked it.'

'Why not? All good publicity for them. Let's the public know they're being kept safe. Let's the baddies know they're being watched. Keeps them anxious.'

'Was that the point of it?'

'The point of it was to sell books. Make money.'

'Did it?'

'What?'

'Make money?'

'Of course. I wouldn't have bothered with it otherwise.'

'So it wasn't one of those books with bad sales figures. The ones you get your revenge on your authors with.'

'Privileged information,' she said.

'And it wasn't like dodgy? Disinformation?'

She looked blank. One of those practiced blank looks.

'You know, presenting people as victims of persecution by the state when they were actually full time informers.'

'I wouldn't know about that.'

'It's normal practice with that sort of book, isn't it? Makes sense. Did they ask to see it? Make a few changes, add a bit here, chop out a bit there. Or did he refuse? And that got up their nose.'

'Why's nobody bumped you off yet, Plant?' she asked.

It was the sort of question he might have expected. The sort of question he ought to have had an answer for. But nothing came to mind. Beyond the old strategy of responding to attack with attack.

'You've been up here a while?'

She shrugged.

'What's a while?'

'Were you here when Vicars was bumped off?'

She fixed a filthy look on Plant and froze. It didn't seem, as far as he could interpret, the result of shock. Not a matter of being caught out. More a look of sheer malignancy. Outrage at the drift of Plant's questioning. But whether it was righteous anger or something sum-

moned up to smother any indication of involvement in Vicar's demise there was no way of telling.

'If you're finished,' she said, 'I've got to go. There's only so many books you can be exposed to each day. Like salt intake. There's a limit. I've got to get out of here.'

They got out of there and she went. She didn't say where. Just flashed the false iconic smile and went. Swallowed up amongst the faces in Lawson street.

Chapter Twenty-five

Fullalove was restive in the country. He did not share Plant's desire for isolation and quiet. Plant was happy to sit on his verandah and absorb the peace. Far preferable to the noise and bustle of urban life, gainful employment and social obligations. As Bulwer Lytton had put it, trying to resign as Colonial Secretary and retreat to his country estate, 'It is so delightful to see the trees bowing to their lord.'

But not Fullalove. He missed the mean streets. He needed to be jostled on pavements and solicited by beggars. He required a crowded backdrop of tattoos and body piercing, magenta hair and ragged jeans. Unless he was threatened by bicyclists and skate-boarders he missed the pain of existence that assured him he was alive.

Plant could have relaxed all day with the occasional smoke and the occasional thought. Something would come to him. Insight would strike him, but gently, more a stroking into awareness than a battering into attention.

But Fullalove was ever on the move. Or wanted to be. He demanded action, reaction. The downside, however, was who knew what lurked beneath the human form divine. It was all very well to sit in a crowded café on a busy street, but you couldn't be sure the people at adjacent tables were Scandinavian backpackers with no command of English. And if they were Scandinavian or German their command of English would be good anyway. Any of them could be listening in to your conversation. Alone, Fullalove was happy enough, sitting there tuning in, listening in to others. But sitting there with Plant and discussing the case, or anything else, there was the eternal issue of surveillance. Conversation was not secure. Byron Bay was out. Too busy.

And so it was that they sat at the Brunswick Heads fish co-op, on

a reach of the river where a dozen or so boats moored, away from the shops and cafés and peripatetics and patrols. Assorted signs advertised Dive & Snorkel, Cruises & Kayaks, Whale Watching. But the whale watching boat was moored and unattended and no watching was going on, as far as could be seen. No sign of anyone on any of the boats. Outside tables, decently far apart. But Fullalove still chose a distant bench, looking over the water, away from the rest of the fish eating families, welfare dependents, greying tourists. No one walking up and down the pathways. Nothing but pelicans preening themselves on the mooring posts and seagulls waiting for scraps, heedless of the sign instructing Don't Feed the Seagulls. As close to privacy as possible, possibly. Secure enough, anyway, for Fullalove to hold forth between mouthfuls of mullet and chips. Once again it tested Plant's vegetarian principles and once again he failed. He told himself there was little difference between taking fish oil tablets and eating fish. Except the tablets gave him indigestion and repeated on him. So he allayed the pain of his conscience by treating the pain in his joints. By eating fish. Suppose to be good for mental processes, too.

'Who have we got then? Fullalove asked.

'For what?'

'As suspects. We've got the women he was bonking or no longer bonking as the case may be: that's the widow, the girlfriend and the agent.'

'That's enough to start with. Except I think we can rule out the widow since she approached me to find him.'

'Rule number one is never rule out anyone,' Fullalove said. 'Especially when they're doing you a favour. Like paying you to come on to them.'

'Hey . . .'

'Hey, hey, oh hey,' Fullalove said, like one of those English folk songs arranged by Percy Grainger or Benjamin Britten.

'I don't see her for it.'

'Of course you don't. So, putting her on one side . . .'

'Good.'

'Though not out of the picture . . .'

Plant began a process of elimination. He ruled out Angela Dark. Not that he doubted she could be a killer, suitably motivated, suitably equipped. But the story mattered more to her. Having a victim to keep targeting. Something to feed to her eager readers, assuming there were any. He rather felt there were. Lots of them. Of course her regular harangues might have incited someone else to do the job. It was not impossible. But that presented a wider field of possibility than he wanted to consider right now. The immediate issue was dealing with the current potential suspects. And he didn't see her as one of them.

'Fair enough,' Fullalove agreed.

'But we know there's a connection between Vicars and Agent Orange.'

'She was his agent. Of course they had a connection. So did the rest of her authors.'

'But were the rest of them screwing her?'

'Probably' Fullalove said.

'I guess it's possible.'

'Your guess is as good as mine.'

'You know you don't believe that.'

'No,' Fullalove agreed. Modestly, as it were.

'Anyway, it potentially connects Vicars' death to Agent Orange.'

'She was his agent.'

'She was his lover.'

'So?'

'So it gives two areas of motivation.' Plant said. He spelled them out. 'The book he was working on. Would someone kill over a book? Possibly. And sex. Would someone kill over sex. Very likely.'

'Or a third person could have killed him from revenge and jealousy. Some other lover of Agent Orange or some slighted lover of Vicars.'

'Because they were having sex.'

'Yes,' Fullalove agreed.

'So who does that suggest?'

'Someone else who was having sex.'

'With both of them?'

'Rule out nothing. But more likely just with one of them. Or had been.'

'Bess?' Plant suggested.

'Mrs Vicars?'

'Or some other mystery woman.'

'Or man. Beware of passive homophobia.'

'Mac Arber thought Agent Orange had some sort of scam going with the university. Cosy was his word.'

'She probably does,' Fullalove agreed again. 'On a retainer for keeping an eye on what gets written, who applies for publication subsidies.'

'Why's she keeping an eye on what gets written?'

'For herself first, no doubt. And for whatever agency wants to know about such things. Or agencies. She could have multiple backers. Or clients. Or whatever she calls them.'

'Why?'

'Just reporting back.'

'Back where?'

'To whoever in the secret state wants to know these things.'

'Is that what you think literary agents do?'

'Of course. Didn't you know that?'

'No, I didn't. Nor do you.'

'She's an agent, it's inevitable. They're in the business of thought control. The spooks have got to have their line into the publishing business. First business they'd have monitored from time immemorial, from the time they invented printing. Before, even. Manuscripts. They needed to keep an eye on who was copying what and where it went. And they need a way to get their disinformation out. Somebody up at secret service head office says, "We've got to do a book on the files before someone does a real job on them. Get out a spoiler. Find a tame, complicit hack to put his name to it. Give Agent Orange a call, she'll set it up.'"

'You reckon?'

'It's a working hypothesis,' Fullalove said.

'Is it? You've got evidence?'

'You don't have evidence in that sort of situation. They're professionals.'

'That's convenient.'

'It is for them.'

'But you know all the same.'

'They can conceal and suppress the evidence, but they can't stop you from making deductions. As long as you don't tell anyone that's what you're doing, of course.'

'Great,' Plant said. 'So I just keep this insight of yours under wraps.'

'If you want a long and happy life, yes,' Fullalove said, emphasising the point by waving a chip in the air, 'yes, I'd recommend that.'

He ate the chip and promptly brandished another. He held it be-

tween finger and thumb, waving it, until it broke and half of it fell to the ground. A flurry of seagulls leapt on it, squawking and fighting.

'See, there's always someone watching, listening, ready to strike.'

The primal animal urges that shape human motivation, a theory which Plant refused to endorse. But he let it go. Stuck to the point.

'So you don't think she's just motivated by a love of literature?'

'No sign of it.'

'How do you know?'

'The same way as you know. Look at the people she represents. Her clients. Politicians, gangsters, media whores.'

'The brightest and best of our generation.'

'Exac'ly,' Fullalove agreed. 'Except it's not our generation, it's theirs.'

'Whose?'

'The people who run the show. Her clients.'

'And she's one of them.'

'She moves in those circles.'

'I don't see her as killing anyone, though, appalling as she is. On the board of the university press for a sitting fee, maybe. And picking out the eyes to flog off for herself, for her usual percentage. But not feeding Vicars death caps.'

'More a potential victim, maybe,' Fullalove suggested, with unnecessary enthusiasm.

'She needs her writers for her percentage. Even the bad ones. Anyway, no one knows which ones are bad.'

'The bad ones are the ones that don't make her any money.'

'And even that can change.'

'True.'

'So I don't see her killing Vicars,' Plant continued. 'Or any of her

other writers. They all might come good and make her fortune.'

'They were having sex.'

'So are lots of people. Doesn't mean they kill each other.'

'She could have been pissed off he was screwing Bess.'

'I didn't get the impression that would matter to her. Or that she cared that much.'

'Maybe,' Fullalove suggested, 'he asked her to kill him. He's got no future prospects after that email business. He talks her into it. Assisted euthanasia. She'll probably get a book out of it. Ghosted by the spirit of Professor Demeritus Vicars.'

He took a swig of ginger beer and burped with satisfaction, checking out the immediate environment. A table of pensioners tucking into their fish. Cars passing on the old highway into town, the occasional one pulling in to the co-op. But no backpackers, no intrusive pedestrians, no amiable, ambling, aimless types wanting to strike up a conversation, too far out of town to walk to, no distance at all but still too far for the laid back and lazy to stroll to.

'What about busty Bess?' he asked.

'She's not especially busty.'

'Checked her out, have you?'

'Chubby, is how I put it.'

'Doesn't alliterate.'

'I don't know,' Plant said. 'She's slippery.'

'Buttery Bess?'

'She implied she was living in Sydney when I first saw her.'

'Implied?'

'Well, she was in Vicars' flat. So I assumed . . .'

'Sloppy work.'

'Then I find out she's actually house sitting in Byron.'

'The old house sitting number. How people of obscure resources come to live free in desirable locations. Raises a lot of questions. Like those foundations the CIA used to use to funnel money through to undeserving causes. Has it occurred to you Bess and Vicars might've been a team?'

'I assumed they were.'

'But run by the same outfit.'

'What outfit?'

'One of the agencies.'

'So why was he bumped off and not her?'

'Exac'ly. Maybe she bumped him off.'

'Why?'

'Because he'd become a liability. After that email business. Feminists in the higher echelons of the security services decided he had to go.'

'Seems a bit excessive.'

'It's been done before.'

'I'm sure.'

'Alternatively, Vicars and his wife might've been a team.'

'And?'

'And she bumps him off.'

'Why?'

'Same reason.'

'Seems far fetched.'

'Eating death caps in the sand dunes seems pretty far fetched.'

'True,' Plant conceded. 'So which is it?'

'You pays your money and you takes your pick.'

'I still find it . . .'

'Unlikely? You don't think they kill their own?'

'You've got no evidence.'

'Of course not. You never do in these cases. Very professional. You've got to admire them.'

Plant looked at him, pretty much in horror. Fullalove grinned.

'Funny old world, innit?'

'You seem to find it vastly amusing.'

'I do, actually,' Fullalove said. 'Fuckin' hilarious.'

'Going back to Bess, she was evasive about where Vicars was when he died.'

'On the beach.'

'Maybe. Unless he died elsewhere and he was dumped there. But I couldn't pin her down on whether or not he was staying with her at the time.'

'Why not?'

'Didn't want to push too hard. Figured he must have been there. Where else?'

'"Must have." "Where else?" Such classic deductive reasoning.'

'You got a better suggestion?'

'Calm down, mate, I'm not disagreeing with you.'

'Oh yeah?'

'I feel your anguish.'

'What anguish?'

'Your uncertainty. Your indecision. Your desires.'

'What are you going on about?'

'Well, they're all playing you, aren't they. The delectable Mrs Vicars. You're wondering what exactly she's paying you for. What desires lurk beneath that mourning black she wears?'

'How do you know what she wears?'

'I picture her as you talk about her. Same with the brazen Bess. Her attractions all bouncing along the surface, she wears so little. Deliciously deshabille. And I sense how you are suffering, holding yourself back when you'd rather be slavering at the kill.'

'I am not slavering.'

'No, you're amazingly self-controlled for one so tormented.'

'Tormented?'

'With conflicting desires. Torn between the black widow and the bit on the side. It's not like you're a psychiatrist,' Fullalove went on. 'Or a Catholic priest sworn to celibacy. There's no rule says it's prohibited to have sex with your clients. Or your suspects. Go for it. Them. While you still can. Impotence can strike without warning.'

'I'm not worried about the legality of it.'

'Well, you don't need to, do you. It's not illegal.'

'I know that.'

'So what's the problem?'

'I don't know what's going on.'

'That's your job description, isn't it?'

'And you've got to wonder.'

'Why's that? They either want you for your body or they're trying to thwart your investigation.'

'Thwart.'

'An old-fashioned word for a time-honoured practice.'

'You reckon?'

'Don't you?'

It was when he had been leaving, standing in the doorway of the townhouse, Kim snuffling around at his feet. He leaned forward to give her a peck on the cheek.

'The old cock in the barnyard routine?'

'Not at all. Pure politeness.'

'The touchy feely totally American practice. What's wrong with just shaking hands?'

'And she gave me a kiss on the lips.'

'You've never had one before?'

'But, you know, with closed lips.'

'Not the tongue in the tonsils trick.'

'And I still can't figure out what it meant.'

'If that's the sum total of your life's problems, I wouldn't worry about it.'

'So I don't know. I don't know if I was meant to come on to her, or if she's just lonely, or what.'

'The beautiful ambiguity of bereavement. Sex and death. Big in European fiction, I'm told, at one time. Late nineteenth century, especially.'

'So if it's not for real, what's she up to? What's she concealing? Or not telling?'

'Clothed in mystery. And you can't work out if you should try and help her do a bit of unveiling or keep your distance.'

'Or is it just reprisal for Bess having had a scene with her husband?'

'Bess. She giving you the eye too?'

Plant had to admit that he had wondered. A certain overt friendliness. A surprisingly engaging manner. Or so it seemed at the time.

'Go for it. You know if you sleep with her you'll have to see her as a suspect. From past experience. Mrs Vicars, too. Maybe you should succumb to both of them. Then it would be all right, they can't both be suspects. Or can they? Maybe they planned it together? Get rid of the unfaithful husband and then, wham bam. Sapphic passion. But

watch it. You could be their next victim. They might have got a taste for it. The sex and death number.'

'Yes,' Plant said, slowly, reflectively. It was not a possibility to dismiss out of hand.

'You want to solve this case?'

'Of course.'

'So go for it. Screw them, then you'll feel justified in suspecting them. And you need some suspects. You need suspects as much as you need a good screw. Or two. Make your guilt work for you.'

'Why does everything you say leave a bad taste in the mouth?'

'You asked me that before. My mouth tastes fine. A bit fishy at the moment, maybe. If it's your mouth, you've got digestion problems. Wait till you prize open those tightly clenched lips of kiss me Kate and find what a taste of honey lurks there.'

They'd finished eating and tossed the wrapping paper and cardboard containers and squeezed lemon wedges and soft drink bottles into the bins provided.

'Do you want to check out the opportunity shops?' Plant asked.

It was the only way to silence Fullalove, take him somewhere where there might be people around who might listen in. Better have him nosing around for potentially dodgy books than having to listen to any more of his jollity. Fullalove took the bait. The rest was silence.

Chapter Twenty-six

'When we were poisoned,' Fullalove said reflectively.

'We weren't poisoned. If you really believe we were poisoned, why are you smoking the dope?'

'It's not the stuff he sold us. It was those two joints he brought out. Ready rolled. Already doctored.'

'If only,' Plant said.

'There's no "if only" about it. You were as affected as me except you didn't know it.'

'Me?'

'You. And I'll tell you why.'

'Why?'

'Because, when we were poisoned, you forgot one very important thing. You forgot to ask about Bess.'

'Why would I ask about her?'

'What's she up to living up here? Was she working on something with Vicars? Were they ever seen together? You lost the plot, Plant. You need to check her out. See where she fits in.'

Plant thought about it. Fullalove was right. He should have checked her out when he was asking about Vicars. How come he'd forgotten? No prizes for answering that.

'It wouldn't hurt,' he said. 'It might fill in the picture. You want to drive round to Nick's again?'

'Are you joking? Another dose of doctored dope? No way. You're on your own on this one.'

Plant was perfectly happy to be on his own. Fullalove had his uses as an ideas man. Paranoia Pty Ltd. But out in the field, or more usu-

ally on the streets, Fullalove's presence was not necessarily a bonus. He could be discouraging.

There again, his ideas were worth considering. He was probably wrong about the poisoning. But why run unnecessary risks? Did he need to call in at Nick's again? Was anything to be gained by the personal touch? He did not want to get too intrusive, or too close, with people like Nick and Klip. Growers and wholesalers.

It was background really. Filling in what he'd missed out. He was not fishing for top secret information. He did not need to check the body language or look for facial tics, inadvertent movements, hands across the mouth, arms folded defensively across the chest. It could all be done with a phone call. But as Fullalove would inevitably point out, phone calls were not an option. The first thing to be monitored. Even the good old landline. So forget doing it by phone. It still meant a phone call to arrange a visit. He'd make it from a phone box on the way.

'Before you go,' Fullalove said, 'you might think you've got immunity driving around in an unwashed bottom of the line Hyundai with a filthy old hat on the shelf behind the back seat. But trying to look like a local banana farmer doesn't work any more. They all drive four-wheel-drives for a start. And the cops know the demographics. It's not young kids they're looking out for. Young kids are just addicted to the internet. It's people like your geriatric mates Nick and Klip who do dope these days. I've been thinking about it. After seeing them. They've been up here for years. They're all getting old now. Take a look at yourself. You fit the profile of an ageing pot head perfectly. You need to smarten up. Try and look younger, not old and decrepit. Don't play ancient jazz in the car, it's a giveaway. Get the car washed and toss out that filthy old hat. Have a shave. Get your hair cut. And I wouldn't have a smoke before you set out. Or when you get there. Highway patrol will just take one look at you, and you're a goner.'

It didn't take long.

'Her? Bess Birmingham? Sure. Fitness freak. Always jogging or cycling somewhere. Turns up at the weirdest times.'

'Like what?'

'Oh, like riding that bloody bike of hers in the middle of the night.'

'Regularly?'

'No idea. I just saw her a couple of weeks ago. One o'clock in the morning and there she is, hammering down the road.'

'What was she doing?'

'No idea. Collecting mushrooms in the full moon, maybe.'

'Was it a full moon?'

'Yes. That's how I could see it was her. Full on loony.'

'And she was collecting mushrooms?'

'She was just pedalling along when I saw her.'

'So why did you say she was mushrooming?'

'Because that's what they do. Harvest at full moon with a golden sickle. All those mad women.'

'Are there lots of them?'

'Covens of them.'

'Really?'

'You better believe it.'

'When was this?'

'Couple of weeks back.'

'Can you remember the date?'

'No. Why would I remember the date?'

'It's kind of important.'

'Look, I don't even know the date today.'

'What were you doing driving around in the middle of the night?'

'It wasn't the middle of the night. It was about one o'clock. I'd been to a party.'

'What sort of a party?'

'What do you mean, what sort of a party? Grass, coke, a few stubbies, what do you expect? Strippers and a drag show?'

'I mean, was it a full moon party or . . . '

'It was a birthday party.'

'So whose birthday was it?'

'What difference does it make whose it was?'

'I don't know. But it might.'

'It was Dick Crabtree's. Up at Potville.'

'Pottsville?'

'Yeah, Potville, on the Weed Coast Way.'

'So when's his birthday?'

'Easy. First of the month.'

'This month? Last month?'

'No, this month. It was just the other week.'

'So you do know the date.'

'If you say so. I guess I do. Sorry about that.'

'And you left at one o'clock.'

'About then. We'd had enough so we split.'

'We?'

'Me and Klip.'

'You were together?'

'No, he followed me.'

'You were in separate vehicles.'

'Obviously.'

'Why?'

'Why not? He was there when I got there. When I said I was leaving he'd had enough and he left at the same time.'

'So he would have seen Bess too?'

'Couldn't miss her.'

'Where exactly?'

'That stretch of road between Potville and Wooyung. You know, where it's flat and straight. Cyclists all love it. They drive their fucking four wheel drives out there with their bikes on the back and then they cycle up and down a few times and then they clip their bike back on and go back to where they come from. Weird. Can't just be for exercise. Must be a pick-up beat for kinky sex. All that weird Lycra they wear and their bums sticking up in the air. I prefer not to think about it. Gives gays a bad name.'

'So there are often cyclists there.'

'Sure. In the daytime. Can't say I've seen anyone else at that time of night, though. Madness.'

'Which way was she going?'

'Same way we were going. South.'

'How could you tell it was her?'

'I had a look, didn't I? When I was going past her.'

'Why did you do that?'

'I don't know. Sexual predatoriness, I guess.'

'And?'

'Well, not my type, is she?'

'I don't know what your type is. What's wrong with her?'

'You're saying I should've stopped and dragged her into the bushes?'

'No.'

'You're just wondering why I didn't.'

'Yes.'

'Didn't take to her. Like your friend Vicars.'

'He wasn't my friend.'

'Nor mine. Too pushy, the both of them.'

'Pushy?'

'Yeah.'

'What do you mean?'

'You'd see them around together. Like they sort of made it their business to know people, you know? She'd latch onto someone and then get them to introduce her to someone else and put them onto him and on it goes.'

'She latched onto you?'

'No way.'

'Got introduced to you?'

'Tried a couple of times. That's how I know her name. But you know, you get to know when people are bad news. You keep your distance. Not my type, anyway.'

'And you felt she was bad news.'

'Pretty much. Could've been, anyway. Like your mate Vicars.'

'He's not my mate.'

'So you keep saying. Well not now he's dead, he wouldn't be, would he?'

'He never was.'

'Fair enough. Whatever. Not to speak ill of the dead and all that. But people like those two, him and her, you just keep your distance. Well, I do. Just in case, you know. Got nothing against them but they don't smell right.'

'Smell?'

'Yeah, you can smell it, like dogs.'

'They smelled like dogs?'

'No idea what they smelled of. Couldn't put a word to it. But you know, you can tell. Dogs can tell. And so can we. You get so you develop the ability. So you keep away.'

'Is that so?'

'Woof, woof.'

Chapter Twenty-seven

'You're not just an ugly face, you know,' Plant assured Fullalove, 'you have ugly thoughts, too.'

'I try.'

'It appears that Bess . . .'

'The chubby one.'

'I think I was wrong. That wasn't chubbiness, that was muscle. She's a health and fitness bicycling freak.'

'Resistant to the touch, hey? Beefy Bess, the Bionic cyclist. Your fingers couldn't sink into those burly biceps and curvaceous calves.'

'I didn't try. If I had . . .'

'You'd be up on an assault charge.'

'Probably. Anyway, the point is . . .'

'You're going to get to the point?'

'She was seen cycling at one in the morning near the murder site.'

'If it was murder.'

'Death site.'

'Who saw her?'

'Nick.'

'One persuasive, reliable witness.'

'And Klip.'

'Two incredible dittos.'

'They were travelling separately.'

'That's better.'

'It puts her in the picture. Whether she killed him or just abandoned him, she was there.'

'Riding a bicycle.'

'Yes.'

'Naked?'

'Why would she be naked?'

'Practising for the Byron naked bike ride.'

'I think Nick would have said if she'd been naked.'

'Maybe he didn't notice.'

'Didn't notice?'

'Wasn't interested. All that masculine house pride stuff . . .'

'So?'

'Well, is it natural?'

'Not if your place is anything to go by. Look, of course she wasn't naked.'

'Have it your way.'

'Why would she be?'

'Makes it more interesting. Anyway, not to worry. At least you seem to be getting the hang of it at last.'

'Getting the hang of what?'

'The investigation business.'

'I have been in it a while.'

'Yeah, well, takes time to work out how crime is solved.'

'How?'

'You know how it works. Information received, of course. The only way. Forget the forensics. Forget the mystification of detection. Forget the magnifying glass and the seven percent solution and the little grey cells. Just follow police procedure.'

'Which is what?'

'Running informers. How else do you think they ever find out

anything? Lean on the low life. Bust someone and give them the choice, tell us what you know and stay in business or go to gaol. They'll dob in the opposition for a bit of police protection. Armed robbery, dealing, all the usual stuff.'

'Is that so?'

'Of course. You know that. And now you've got your own grass. In the grass growing business. Classic. A dealer. In the flesh. And all flesh is grass. What better grass than a grass dealer . . .'

'Yes, I get the point.'

'What happened when they legalised homosexuality? Suddenly the cops and the security people had nothing to hold over all those poor frightened buggers they'd been threatening with exposure. Suddenly they'd lost all their snouts and grasses. So what happens?'

'You tell me.'

'They flood the place with dope. Now they've got something else to bust people for. Bust them for possession or supply and offer them a choice. We'll lose the paperwork and let it go if you just give us a few names. For the next fifty years of your life. And more. And they don't lose the paperwork, they just hold it over them.'

Plant grunted. More depressing world watch analysis from Fullalove.

'You don't believe me? Look at the time frame. Too neat a synchronicity. Legalising homosexuality at the same time everyone had to get stoned. Neat, huh? They've got to have something to hold over folks. Otherwise they don't even get to solve the twenty-two percent of reported crimes that do get solved.'

'Why would you trust informers?'

'Well, you probably don't. Doesn't matter as long as they dob somebody in. If they don't deliver, you bang them away. So they tend to deliver.'

'They could be making stuff up. Paying off scores.'

'Of course,' Fullalove agreed. 'No reason to believe any of it. No more than any other aspect of the world we live in. That's not the point I'm making. I'm just saying how the system works. We're not talking about truth and justice here. I'm not saying it's a perfect system. Just a way of getting a result.'

'And it could be a wrong result.'

'You'd be a mug if you didn't think so. Most of what goes on is pretty wrong, isn't it? Foreign policy. Drones and high explosives. But that's the world we live in. So, they made one big mistake in legalising homosexuality, lost their leverage on people. They're not going to fuck up again by decriminalising marijuana. They need drugs to be illegal. Widespread and illegal. Then you've always got something to hold over folks. Like the uncensored internet. They need all those paedophile sites and WikiLeaks and jihadist calls to arms and instructions on making a pressure cooker bomb like they need the place awash with dope, so they've got something to nail people with who are stupid enough to hit on those sites. Makes life easier.'

'So all crime is solved by information received from people under threat, you're saying. No other way.'

'Pretty much. The only real alternative is confessions. People get a guilty fit and tell all. Or they have it beaten out of them. Bit of sleep deprivation, bit of water boarding, electric prodding, savage dogs. Whatever. Enhanced interrogation techniques. It's the only way, mate. Information received or a confession. And now you've got your information received. Didn't even have to threaten anyone for it. Bess seen bicycling away from the scene of the crime. Vicars' car. I bet it had one of those racks on the back you can clamp a bike on. Bess could've put her bike on the back of the car, they drive out there to the beach, she feeds him the mushrooms, leaves him there and cycles home. So it looks like he drove there on his own. But we know better, now, don't we?'

Plant brooded on it. The couple of bicycles up at the Gold Coast

townhouse. He should have asked if they went out riding. Outside the compound. Asked if Vicars' car had had such a rack. The clue had been there, but he hadn't seen the significance of it. Same with the bicycle in Bess's hallway. He'd just seen it as another irritation, current fashion, contemporary obsession. Something he tried to ignore and avoid. There was a lesson in that. But it hadn't seemed significant. Not till the information received.

'So, are you going to ask her about it?' Fullalove asked. 'Ask her about why she hadn't mentioned she happened to be cycling near the beach where he was found dead at one a. m. on the morning of the second? And why she hadn't thought to mention it before? Confront her in all her musculature?'

'I don't know. It's their word against hers. Do we believe Nick? Or is he just trying to set her up? Maybe someone else saw her.'

'How're you going to find out that? You're going to requisition all the road surveillance records? Should be easy enough. And the cops are going to love you. Trampling on their turf. They'll probably arrest you.'

'For what?'

'Wasting police time. Withholding evidence. High level of THC in your blood. Accessory to murder. Contaminating a crime scene. You name it.'

It was a likely enough scenario.

'Are you going to tell the waiting widow? That should be a touching moment.'

Plant considered it.

'Not right away.'

'She is paying you.'

'I know.'

'Maybe it'll be the news she wants.'

'Maybe.'

'So what are you going to do?'

'I don't know.'

'You could inform Uncle Toby. He can feed the info back to whoever he feeds stuff back to. They can check it out and take it from there. An anonymous tip off.'

'I don't know,' Plant said again. 'It's still only circumstantial. It doesn't prove Bess stuffed death caps down his throat. Could be it just so happened he ate the death caps and she got the gold tops and they were both tripping out of their skulls and she cycled off into the sunrise.'

'Could be. In the hands of a good lawyer. It still places her at the death scene and she just happened not to mention it to you.'

'Well, she wouldn't, would she? Would you? What's her motive?'

'How about she was madly in love with Vicars and he wouldn't leave his wife?'

'In that case why didn't she kill the wife? I'm not sure she was madly in love with him. I didn't get the impression she was grieving inconsolably.'

'She was too busy appearing seductive in your eyes.'

'I don't know,' Plant said.

'Surely you do. Can't you tell by now if someone's coming on to you?'

'Doesn't mean she hadn't killed him. She might have been coming on to me to, I don't know, divert my suspicions . . .'

He tailed off.

'Instead of which she alerted your suspicions. You'd think women would know by now that if they come on to you, you'll eventually suspect them of murder.'

'Maybe it was an accident.'

'Sure.'

'Somehow an amanita got mixed in with the gold tops.'

'And he just happened to get the amanita and she didn't.'

'It's not impossible.'

'Just bad luck. For Vicars.'

Plant tried again. Ran another theory.

'Given that Vicars was dodgy, the book on the files, the decriminalising agenda, maybe that's what got him killed.'

'What did?'

'Someone spotted him as some sort of spook.'

'If they were smart enough to spot him as a spook, they'd be smart enough not to kill him. You don't go killing cops or spooks. Like you don't defraud banks. They never give up till they nail you.'

'Who don't?'

'Cops, spooks and banks. They've got all the resources. The only people who kill cops and spooks are other cops and spooks.'

'Is that so?'

'Generally.'

'So you're saying the security services bumped him off. Why would they kill one of their own? To make it look like he wasn't one of their own, to try and make it look like he hadn't been on the scene as a spook, but that the spooks killed him because he was a good guy?'

'A grand conception. But no,' Fullalove said, 'I don't think, all things considered, that the security services kill off their informers just to make it look like they weren't informers. Not the best way to authenticate someone if you want to keep them in business.'

'It's a narrative. Whether or not it's historically accurate or an elegant fiction designed to mislead, take your pick. Maybe they didn't want to keep him in business. Maybe after that email business he

was a liability.'

'The way you can be sure it's a security services killing,' Fullalove said, 'is it doesn't look like one.'

'So that means if it looks like a CIA or SIS or ASIO job, it isn't.'

'Correct.'

'So in that case,' Plant said, 'if they planned to kill someone you'd expect the CIA or SIS or ASIO et cetera would make it look like a secret service killing, because everyone believes that if it looks like they did it, they didn't.'

'Not everyone.'

'But you get my point.'

Fullalove sniffed.

'And there's the point Mrs Vicars raised,' Plant added.

'Go on.'

'That he was locked into something he wanted to get out of.'

'You're saying he killed himself to get off the hook?'

'No, I'm saying they killed him because he was trying to get off the hook.'

'Why would they bother?'

'Because he knew too much.'

'Unlikely.'

'But not inconceivable.'

'Nothing's inconceivable in that world,' Fullalove agreed. He said it with evident satisfaction. A rare certainty in a world of uncertainty. The secure knowledge that nothing could be known for sure. The triumph of post-modernism.

'Have you looked into Bicycling Bess's background?' Fullalove asked.

'Not yet.'

'Maybe you should.'

'Have you?'

'I have, as it happens. I checked her out on the university web-site while you were doing your house calls. Three years in the states. Or so it says.'

'Doing what?'

'Ostensibly at university.'

'So she met Vicars there, you're saying?'

'Maybe. Maybe they both trained at the same spook farm.'

'You're saying she's a spook now.'

'Why else would she spend three years in the states?'

'Doing a degree.'

'No doubt. And she lobs in here? Just checking out the alternative. Fifty years after it all began.'

'What are you saying, Fullalove?'

'She's recruited on campus, gets her credentials fixed up, comes out here on some dodgy research project, meets up with Vicars.'

'And kills him?'

'Another elegant fiction for you.'

'Why would she kill him?'

'Just following orders.'

'You don't believe that, do you?'

Fullalove gave his village idiot look, dumb, detached from it all, don't ask me anything.

'You do believe it, don't you?'

He gave his village idiot grin. Tongue lurking lasciviously in the corner of his mouth. Eyes wide.

'Just because she spent time in the states. That's all you need, isn't

it? Like a Russian in a cold war spy narrative. Or a butler in a country house murder. Guilt by definition.'

'Why not?' Fullalove grinned. 'Somebody killed him.'

'So you're saying Bess did it.'

'Why not?'

'In your world view it's always *cherchez la femme, crime passionnel.*'

'Not denying it. But just because a woman did it doesn't mean it was a *crime passionnel.* A very sexist assumption that, Mr Plant. Sex, jealousy and revenge.'

'So?'

'Just because a woman did it doesn't mean it wasn't political.'

'But you can't prove that.'

'Of course not. That's why they do it that way, make it look like a *crime passionnel.* That's how you know.'

'You know it's not a *crime passionnel* because it looks like one?'

'With people like Vicars and Angela Dark and Agent Orange around, I'd think so.'

Chapter Twenty-eight

There wasn't much doubt in Plant's mind that Bess had done it. Some doubt, but not much. He hadn't picked her as a killer. But circumstantially it looked bad for her. Pity about that. There was much he liked about her. But he could think of no good reason why she was cycling near the murder site at one in the morning. And had omitted to mention the fact. If it was a murder, of course. Accident and suicide remained possibilities. Without grilling her he could not be finally sure. And if he wasn't finally sure, how could he report back to Mrs Vicars? Kate. Raise a possibility that just might not be true. Create false hope, if being told your husband's girlfriend had killed him was something hoped for. And then finding it wasn't true, if it turned out not to be true.

He had a duty to his client. She was paying the bill after all. But since she was paying, his duty could be construed as protecting her rather than upsetting or alarming or exciting her. And Bess too, if it turned out she wasn't the killer, shouldn't she have been protected rather than maligned and calumniated and accused and all the rest of it? He worried that not telling Kate might be construed as a betrayal. Holding out on a client. But that was between him and her. Something to be sorted out later. Or hopefully something that could just be passed over in the satisfaction of some final revelation.

So, not telling Mrs Vicars, Kate, was one thing. But Plant couldn't just let it rest at that. And as Fullalove had pointed out, he couldn't just phone the local police. Well, he could, but the outcome might well be undesirable. Distressing. Deeply unpleasant.

Which left Uncle Toby. Who had initiated the inquiry. So Uncle Toby it was. Which again was not a simple matter of making a phone call, since it was not something to be communicated by phone, or email, or any other interceptible electronic means. Dis-

cretion, Uncle Toby had stressed. Well, he had just said it, the word, but just to say it was a matter of stressing. You could take the triple underlining for granted.

'Best we meet rather than talk over the phone. More . . .'

'Secure,' Plant had offered.

'More personal, I think,' Uncle Toby had put it.

It still involved making a phone call to arrange a more personal exchange. But that was clearly the way he wanted it.

'Dear boy. You have caught me on the hop. I am rushing to the airport. Is it urgent?'

'It is, rather.'

The 'rather' worked, the tentative approach. Anything too definite was likely to turn Uncle Toby off, bore him, rather than entice him.

'Well, meet me at the terminal. I am due to depart at noon.'

'See you at eleven, then,' Plant agreed, departure time and carrier established.

Uncle Toby stood at the Gold Coast airport in southern states mode, no longer the white shoes and cravat, but blue blazer and grey trousers, the ex-military, former head-boy look. Pursed lips and an expression of grim distaste.

'I remember when flying was an occasion. You dressed up for it. Like going to the theatre. Out to dinner. Now look at them.'

He gestured at the arriving and departing passengers around him.

'Dregs of the earth.'

Gross, huge people in baggy t-shirts, shorts and rubber thongs, anorexic stick insects in black Lycra, bawling, shouting, wriggling children of the sort once describable as hideous. Plant could see how easy it would be, once you lost your political or spiritual faith in humanity and co-operation and community, how easy it would be to

end up like Uncle Toby, lamenting that he did not have access to the powers residing in the latest anti-terrorist legislation to round them all up on sight.

'Exterminate the brutes,' Uncle Toby hissed.

'Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*,' Plant acknowledged. The benefits of a literary education.

'You think so?' Uncle Toby said, chillingly.

They sat huddled at a table amidst holidaymakers and hookers, strippers and bouncers, lifeguards, real estate agents and security personnel. They sipped at their English breakfast tea. The place was wired out enough, no need to add coffee to the mix.

Uncle Toby received the information about Bess' nocturnal cycle ride impassively. Possibly he was preoccupied with his trip. Possibly it wasn't the news he wanted. Possibly he didn't care. He gave no indication.

'I haven't told the police. Or Kate, Mrs Vicars.'

'No,' Uncle Toby said. Acknowledging what Plant had not done. Or perhaps indicating that he should leave it undone.

'Should I tell her, do you think? Or wait until we get confirmation?'

'Or rebuttal.'

'Or rebuttal. Clarification, anyway.'

Uncle Toby smiled unhelpfully. Something of a forced smile, given the immediate environment.

'I'd like to be sure.'

'Wouldn't we all, dear boy.'

'Anyway . . .'

'Keep me informed.'

'And you me.'

Uncle Toby squeezed out another sad smile.

It could have been enigmatically. Or it could have been a way of saying no. Or, for that matter, yes. Without having to say it in words. Plausible deniability, whatever meaning Plant might care to take from it. He had expected nothing less. Or more. Whichever. No surprises there.

Bess's story was that they went to the beach, she and Vicars. Tim. He wanted to drop mushrooms at the full moon. Hanging out in the Valley of the Weed, he had begun to absorb some of its world view. The quasi-magical mysteries prevalent there. Like doing mushrooms at the full moon. Research, he called it. Check out if a full moon trip was qualitatively different from a new moon or a waning moon experience.

The plan was he'd spend however long it took on the beach and then he'd drive back up to the Gold Coast. Bess said she was happy to go along and cavort on the beach for a while, but would pass on the mushrooms. She'd done mushrooms enough times. She didn't need that mind wrenching experience any more. Had things to do the next day. She didn't want to spend all night on the beach and end up trashed, so she put her bike on the rack on his car so she could ride back, get her exercise, and leave him to groove on the waves and the moon and the rest of the cosmic experience. They sat on the beach there, the moon full, beaming down on them, silvering the surface of the sea and the sand. She had no idea where he got the mushrooms from. Never thought to ask. Why would she? You didn't ask things like that. He just had them with him. No, she hadn't added to them. She hadn't brought any with her. She just shared a joint with him while he ate them. After a while it was getting a bit nippy. He was ready to lift off into space, happily hallucinating there, seemed safe enough and happy, so she gave him a kiss or two and cycled back home. It was about one in the morning.

She didn't expect to hear from him. He wasn't like that, he wasn't someone who was on the phone all the time. And she couldn't phone his house, anyway, not with the risk of his wife answering. No emails anymore, now the university had cut him off from its server and he hadn't arranged another one.

So she didn't know he hadn't got back, didn't know he'd died there. Last thing he'd said was he was fine, told her to go, said he just wanted to focus on tripping, perfectly happy to be alone, preferred it that way.

The police believed her.

She'd said nothing to Plant since as far as she was concerned it was none of his business.

'Well,' Fullalove said 'either the police believed her or someone leant on them. Pity about that. Looks like it's going to be one of the seventy-eight percent of unsolved crimes. Unless you get a confession from someone.'

Chapter Twenty-nine

Back up the Gold Coast, into the security compound, past the guard hut, into the town house. They sat there in the fading light, the world outside taking on the subdued grey tones of the room. She had opened a bottle of wine and poured a couple of glasses. Plant sipped at it, a pleasant enough light white. Her hair was unplaited, held back in a pony tail and pinned up on top of her head.

'It was just a job when he took it on,' she said.

'He wasn't into dope before?'

'No. Not at all. He'd shared the occasional joint at the occasional party. Done the odd line of coke.'

'As one does,' Plant agreed.

'As some people do, anyway,' she said. Rather primly. As if she never inhaled, and the rest of it.

'So the book wasn't his idea.'

'The books were never his idea. No, it was just another job he got given. Project, he always called it. Job sounded a bit too blue collar.'

'So where did it come from?'

'I imagine where all his work came from.'

'Which is where?

'Oh, there were people he knew from all over the place. They'd phone him up. They'd raise some research grant from some foundation or other.'

'You never met them?'

'Why would I?'

'He kept them away?'

'I wasn't that interested. I can't say I ever knew what he was up to.

Just some project or other. But he'd get these contracts.'

'From his agent?'

'That harridan?'

Plant gave a half smile of support. He wasn't pushing the questioning.

'So the decriminalising marijuana book, project, was . . .'

'Just something he took on. Got given. And then he got sucked into it.'

'In what way?'

She looked at him disdainfully. No other way to describe it.

'In getting stoned,' she said. 'He'd never had anything to do with that world before. But he started hanging out down the coast. Got stoned too many times, tried mushrooms, saw God, and . . .'

'Flipped?'

'Yes. After he really got into it.'

'Into what?'

'The whole thing. Marijuana, mushrooms, madness.'

'Madness?'

'Total madness.'

'Literally?'

'Sure. He got ridiculous. Singing 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' and 'Hey Mr Tambourine Man' in the shower every morning. I mean, really. Full on mania. A whole library of books on mushrooms. Anything you'd want to know about them and more. How to identify them, how to preserve them, which ones are poisonous, how to prepare them. Great bedtime reading for a girl when she's alone night after night. Almost an education in itself.'

She took a hefty swig of the wine and topped up her glass. Plant passed, he'd only sipped at his. Kim lay stretched on the floor, the

picture of oblivion, pretending to be asleep, eyes shut, ears pricked up, playing the great game.

'Mushrooms. Not marijuana.'

'Yes. I mean, he'd started with the marijuana book. But he'd soon got pretty well everything he wanted. I think the book was nearly finished. So he claimed. Not that I believed anything that he said any more. He'd collected all the historical stuff. But he got carried away on mushrooms. Which was nothing do with the decriminalising project. He just kept buying the stuff.'

'Books? Or mushrooms?'

'Both. The lot,' she said. 'E-books, hard copies, Allegro, Wasson . . .'

She knew the names, the authors, the titles, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross, Soma* and the rest.

'So he was into taking mushrooms.'

'That's what I'm telling you, Plant. He flipped. He turned into a fucking hippy. Half a century after everyone else. One of life's pioneers. It was like he'd time travelled. Backwards.'

'You didn't tell me this before.'

'It's not the sort of thing you go around telling people,' she said. 'I didn't think it was relevant.'

'But he died from mushroom poisoning.'

'I didn't know that at the time, did I?'

'Didn't you?' he asked.

She gave him a severe look.

'You know I didn't. I only just found out, didn't I?'

He could have persisted with another 'Did you?' But he didn't. Instead he asked, 'How did you feel about that?'

'About what?'

'About him turning into a born again hippy?'

'Oh, ecstatic,' she said. 'At least when he was bonking his bimbos he wasn't under my feet all the time. But now he decides he's seen the meaning of life and he's going to drop out, chuck in his job, and expect me to support him while he sits around getting stoned.'

'You knew he was having affairs?'

'Bonking his bimbos? Of course. I knew everything. I knew his password. I knew all about his silly emails before they blew up. You could see it happening. The more stoned he got the more ridiculous his emails got and the more his real unreconstructed self emerged.'

'Really?'

'Of course. And now you're wondering if it was me who sent them to *The Dark Side*. You're so mistrustful, Plant.'

Not mistrustful enough, he reflected.

'I thought they were pathetic but I never thought he'd lose his job over them. Anyway, I was more interested in the ones to his tarts. He thought they were coded, you know, private language. But I knew what they meant. I could read him like a book.'

'But you put up with it?'

She held up her glass to the last of the light and downed it in a couple of swigs. Some sort of answer.

'He announced he was going to stick with the project till the funding ran out and that was it. No more projects. He was going to drop out and live off the royalties of the book.'

'The decriminalising book?'

'Well, the others never brought in any money that I could see.'

'But this was going to.'

'I don't see why. Why would it if the others didn't?'

'And when was the funding running out?'

'End of the year. If they hadn't already cut it off after the univer-

sity suspended him.'

'Did they cut it off?'

'Not as far as I know. You'd have to check his bank account.'

'You don't have a shared account.'

'No way,' she said, reaching for the bottle and filling her glass again.

'So how did you feel about that?'

'Oh, thrilled to the bone,' she said. 'Having him lying around the house all day communing with the universe and bringing in zero income. What more could a girl wish for?'

'Could you afford it?'

'Could I afford him? In a word, no.'

'What would you have done?'

'Got rid of him for a start, obviously.'

Plant stopped himself from asking how. He wasn't sure he wanted to know right now. He needed time to reflect on that one. He wasn't sure that he didn't know already.

One thing puzzled him.

'If you felt like that, why did you hire me to find him?' he asked.

'An old fashioned sense of responsibility, I suppose. Automatic response. Duty calls.'

'Really,' Plant said, in admiration rather than interrogation.

She laughed.

'A pity they cleared that bitch. I'd've liked her to have gone down for it.'

'Bess?'

'Is that what she called herself? I could never keep up with their names. Pity, anyway. Still, as long as they think he did it to himself

they won't come round here pestering me again.'

'They questioned you?'

'Oh, Plant, questioned? The practically took me apart and peered into every orifice before they put me back together again and cleared me.'

'Really?'

'Didn't they tell you?'

'I'm not in touch with the police.'

'That's good,' she said.

'Is it?'

'Oh definitely.'

She smiled in a gentle, affectionate way.

'I told them everything I knew – that yes, Tim collected mushrooms and dried them and kept them in little bottles, must've got them mixed up when he was stoned. I refused to have anything to do with his drug experiments. That's why he hung out with that creature down at Byron.'

'And that's what they think happened? That he accidentally mixed the death caps in with the gold tops?'

'That's what I told them, yes.'

'But why did he keep dried death caps?' he asked.

'Good question.'

'Did he really?'

'You're doubting me?'

'Seems a strange thing to do.'

'Yes. He was a strange person.'

Maybe. Not an especially persuasive explanation, however. Plant tried one of his fixed, interrogative expressions.

'I've no idea,' she said. 'He was obsessed with mushrooms.'

'It doesn't make sense. They're not hallucinogenic. Why would he want them?'

'You think I collected them?'

He looked at her again.

'Come on, Plant. What do you take me for?'

He didn't know.

'Maybe he was planning on killing me,' she said. 'So he could run off with one of his bits on the side.'

'Do you really think so?'

'Or I could've done it, of course. Is that what you're thinking? Got in first. Chopped up a few death caps and put them in with the gold tops. A pushover.'

'Put them in where?'

'In the little jars he kept them in. He dried them and preserved them.'

'And they still worked?'

'Well, the death caps did,' she laughed. 'Pity he didn't share them with that little slut. Ah well. Can't win them all.'

A chill swept through him, as swift as a blizzard.

'Are you telling me you . . . '

She cut him off.

'I'm not telling you anything. And don't you go telling anyone anything either. Especially the police you're not in touch with. Stay out of touch.'

He sat there, frozen, silent, unable to speak, unable to think of anything to say even if he could have spoken.

'Come on, you're not drinking.'

She laughed and reached over for the bottle. He found his eyes drawn down into the opening neck of her shirt.

'What, you think I did it?'

She topped up his glass and filled her own.

'I could have, of course,' she said. 'Perfect opportunity. And means and motive. But if I did, it would be your word against mine. I'll say you sexually molested me. And not just lascivious looking. You got enraged when I refused your advances. Or maybe I'll tell them how you were trying to extort money from me by threatening to go to the police with this extraordinary story you'd fabricated. Or there again maybe I won't say anything at all, just be saddened at human behaviour. And then when I tell them what we've got on you . . .'

'What have you got on me?'

'What have I got on you? Wouldn't you like to know. I could have all your dirty little secrets, Plant. All recorded and documented and filed. Sex and drugs and seedy behaviour like impersonating a private detective and breaking and entering and consorting . . .'

'Who's we?'

'Just a figure of speech,' she laughed. 'Or maybe a slip of the tongue.'

He smiled, tentatively.

'Anyway, how do you know it wasn't suicide? How do you know he didn't know what he was doing? He knew all about mushrooms. He'd made himself an expert. He'd become obsessed with them. He could recognise them all. In the field and when they were picked and dried. He could tell which were which. He could have made a deliberate choice. That's what the police decided. And they'd know, wouldn't they? They checked with me. I showed them his collection of books on mushrooms. A whole shelf of them in his study upstairs. They could see from them that he knew what he was doing. Or thought he knew.'

She gave a scornful laugh.

'Really?' Plant said.

'Nice thought, anyway.'

'Where are his dried mushrooms?' Plant asked.

'The police took them. I wondered about them. I thought of junking them. But that might have looked fishy. I mean, they were evidence. I didn't think I'd put my prints on them. But you can never be sure. So I made a point of handling them when the police came. You know, being helpful, here, take these, officer.'

'And they took them?'

'Pity, really, or we could've done a trip together.'

He felt a chill coursing through his body again.

'But you'd be too terrified to try, wouldn't you? You wouldn't trust me not to have slipped some death cap into yours, would you?'

'Probably,' he managed to squeeze out.

She reached for her glass and knocked it over. She'd pretty well emptied it, so not much spilled. She went out to the kitchen and came back with a cloth and another bottle of wine. She wiped up the spillage with the cloth and opened the bottle and filled her glass again.

'Clumsy me,' she said. 'There I go again. Accidents will happen. I could have been sweeping the floor and Kim could have got under my feet by the pantry and the broom handle could have knocked Tim's jars down and they could have broken. And I could have made sure I picked out the glass fragments and got two new jars and put the dried mushrooms back in and got them mixed up somehow. How about that?'

'Is that what happened?'

'What do you reckon? Who knows what happened? But it's a possibility, isn't it, don't you think?'

She offered it as a story, another narrative. Almost in quotations marks. As if challenging him to believe it. Or not. As he wished.

There wasn't a lot of point going any further after that. Unless he planned on interpreting the stories, on the assumption that her fictions would be based on some sort of fact that would lead to the truth. But it was all a bit too post-modern, story within story, self-generating fictions, endlessly deferred closure. Or all a bit too over-familiar and part of a well attested cultural tradition, Scheherazade's tales, and another thousand nights to go.

'Why did you hire me?' Plant asked.

'To find Tim, of course.'

'But if you knew he was dead . . .'

'But I didn't know, did I? How would I know he'd actually gone and eaten the death caps?'

'So you were covering yourself?'

'"What needs thou greater covering than a man?"' she asked. 'And to be honest, Plant . . .'

'Yes, do be honest.'

'To keep you close to me.'

She said it throatily, like she was channelling Marlene Dietrich or someone. Something else that made Plant feel uneasy. Conflicted, anyway.

'So that you'd know what I found out.'

'That too,' she said. 'Assuming that you did find out anything. Anyway, I couldn't do much about it. Professor Oates had sort of foisted you onto me. How could I refuse? No choice, really. And without all the facilities and forensics of the police and without access to the surveillance systems, maybe we sort of figured that it would take you a while anyway. If we'd told the police they might have got onto it quicker.'

'Who's we?' he asked again.

'You never did ask who I worked for, did you, Plant?'

'I assumed . . .'

'Of course. Typical masculine unenlightenment. Very remiss. The sort of unreconstructed view of things that could get you into a lot of trouble.'

'I didn't know that you did work.'

'You still don't.'

'So where do you work?'

'Who said that I did?'

'You said "if we'd told the police." Who's we?'

'A figure of speech.'

Fullalove's taunting speculations nagged at Plant's consciousness.

'Uncle Toby? The company? The firm?'

'You read too many spy books, Plant. You get sucked into the terminology. Makes you think you're in the know. You'll be talking about "wet jobs" next. You ought to watch it. Be more careful for your own good. Don't get too sharp, you'll cut yourself.'

She took another swig of her wine and chuckled.

Plant sat there somewhat less than amused. She reached across and tapped him lightly on the cheek.

'You'll be wondering next, if it wasn't an accident or a suicide, was it a crime of passion after all?'

'Will I?'

'Or was that just the cover story, and it was actually one of those secret state conspiracies.'

'Was it?'

'You know, he'd dropped too many mushrooms, gone rogue, become a liability, required termination.'

'Is that what happened?'

'Had he become a liability? He had to me. Did he require termi-

nation? What do you think? Take care you don't become a liability too, Plant, now that you've been told.'

She took a hefty swig from her glass.

'Told what?'

'Don't ever think of telling anyone else.'

'Tell them what?'

'What you think I've told you. What you'll never know for sure. And I wouldn't go asking around and trying to find out. Let it be our little secret, Plant. Our big secret. Just something between you and me. Something you'll never tell to police or media or anyone.'

'But the police don't think you did it,' he said. Hopefully.

'Oh, who knows what the police think? They can think what they like as long as they haven't arrested me or pressed charges.'

Had the police believed her, that it was an accident, or suicide? Or, as Fullalove had speculated about Bess, had someone leaned on them?

She chuckled into her glass, and then reached for the bottle to top it up again.

'It's better for you that no one knows you know, I can assure you.'

'But I don't know,' he said.

It sounded unconvincing.

'Mistake, Plant. Just accept that you do know. And act accordingly within the burden of that knowledge.'

He tried laughing.

'I think you're just putting me on.'

'Why would I do that?'

'I think you get off on it,' he said, hopefully. 'Like that plait. You had me fooled. I got you wrong, I thought you were like some sort of straight, posh prefect. Private girls' school. All pure and pristine.

I was sort of attracted to you but I thought you were inaccessible.'

'What's this "sort of attracted"?'

'I thought you were all straight and proper. So I curbed my desires.'

'"Curbed my desires",' she mocked. 'Where do you find these words? You got some handbook of desperate narratives you use?'

'Now I realise it's all an act. Costume drama. Gymslips and dominatrices. You're actually into weird games.'

'Weird games?' she said. 'And by that you are implying sex games, is that it? I'm sure you know more about that sort of thing than I do.'

She smiled. Enigmatically, of course.

'Not really,' he said. 'Not that I'm knocking it, it's all just a bit new to me, but it certainly raises the heart beat.'

'What does?'

'All the stuff you've been saying.'

'What stuff?'

Was she pushing him, to hear him say whatever it was that was going to get him killed? He could feel the surge of sheer terror, nervous energy flowing through him. If he could convert it into sexual energy maybe he had a chance of surviving. Weird games, like he'd said. Mind games. Sex games. The best explanation. The only hope. You've got to believe it, Plant. Anything else is unthinkable.

She reached up and let down her hair. It cascaded around her neck and down to her shoulders like the Reichenbach fall, framing her there as she lunged forward and wrapped her arms around him and drew him towards her and kissed him full on the lips, her tongue pressing hard into his mouth.

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